

**STAR
WARS**
LEGACY'S EDGE
EMPIRE OF LIGHT

GREGORY O. SCOTT



INTRODUCTION

Empire of Light is the second volume of what's looking to be a trilogy bridging the gap between the Del Rey novels and Dark Horse's *Legacy* comics. When starting this project I knew the biggest thing that needed to be addressed was the creation of the Fel Empire and the Imperial Knights. As you might guess from the title, that's what this book is about. At the same time it also wraps up some plot threads left dangling from the *Fate of the Jedi* series, which means it's a long book with a lot of stuff to cover.

When writing the first volume I made a conscious effort to re-use story elements from first installments of previous SW trilogies (the climactic fight at a superweapon, the dying mentor who passes the torch, the major villain who's beaten at the end while the larger threat remains). This story strikes out on its own a bit more and picks up almost a generation after *A Shadowed Peace*, which means characters from the *Legacy* comics are starting to move into the picture.

The unique advantage of a bridge project is that the beginning and the end are already written, but there's enough space in between to create a unique story that draws on ideas from either end but can still stand on its own. That's certainly the case for *Jedi of the Future* and on some level, I think, for *Empire of Light* too. At this stage in the story the heroes from the Del Rey novels are in their waning years and those from the *Legacy* comics are just getting started. That means this middle book is where the grandchildren of Luke, Han, and Leia will make the choices that define them.

WHAT'S GONE BEFORE

In the decades following the defeat of Abeloth and the Lost Tribe of the Sith, the galaxy settled into a period of stability known as the Long Peace. The Galactic Alliance ruled on Coruscant. The Imperial Remnant steadily democratized under the guidance of **Jagged Fel** and established its own Jedi academy under **Jaina Solo**. The Jedi Order, guided by **Luke Skywalker** and later his son **Ben**, worked in cooperation with secular governments while remaining independent on Ossus.

In 63 ABY, a coup on Hapes backed by the One Sith's **Darth Xoran** ousted Queen Mother **Tenel Ka** and killed Ben's wife **Katia**. Their daughter **Jade** survived and trained as a Jedi with **Jodram Tainer** and **Wharn**, the Order's first Chiss apprentice. Princess **Allana Solo Djo** became a senator representing the Hapan exiles on Coruscant.

In 75 ABY, Darth Xoran engineered a larger and bloodier insurrection in the Senex and Juvex Sectors with the help of Mandalorian mercenaries and her apprentice, **Darth Kheykid**. Jaina's son **Davek**, a lieutenant in the Imperial Navy, was forced to take command of the frigate *Voidwalker* and kept its crew alive for six weeks behind enemy lines. Davek's Jedi brother **Arlen**, with the help of wayward Mandalorian **Tamar Skirata**, helped discover the depth of Xoran's activity.

In a final confrontation, the Fel brothers joined Ben Skywalker's Jedi to attack Darth Xoran's worldship. During the battle Wharn was captured by Darth Kheykid and taken to the Sith stronghold on Hapes. Ben and Jade confronted Darth Xoran and together defeated her, at the cost of Ben's life. In the aftermath of the crisis, Allana was elected Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance and pledged to uphold the Long Peace.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Gevern Auchs, *Mand'alor* (human male)
Darth Avanc, Sith Lord (Keshiri male)
Neela Avaris, Imperial Head of State (human female)
Lukas Briggs, Imperial quartermaster (human male)
Damien Corde, Imperial spy (human male)
Allana Solo Djo, Jedi Knight (human female)
Por Dun, Imperial captain (Kel Dor female)
Arlen Fel, Jedi Master (human male)
Davek Fel, Imperial admiral (human male)
Jaina Solo Fel, Jedi Master (human female)
Jagged Fel, former statesman (human male)
Marasiah Valtor Fel, Jedi Knight (human female)
Marin Fel, Jedi apprentice (human female)
Roan Fel, child (human male)
Vitor Fel, Jedi apprentice (human male)
Darth Kheykid, Sith Lord (Barabel male)
Darth Kroan, Sith Lord (human male)
Demia Lohr, Queen of Hapes (human female)
Serissa Lohr, Hapan princess (human female)
Tamar Skirata, ranger (human female)
Jade Skywalker Tainer, Jedi Knight (human female)
Jodram Tainer, Jedi Knight (human male)
Darth Terrid, Sith Lord (Chiss male)
Corrien Veers, Imperial moff (human male)

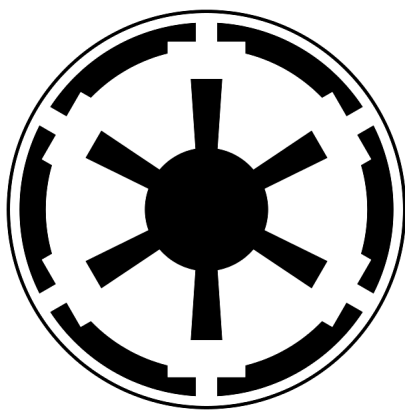
A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away....

STAR WARS

LEGACY'S EDGE

EMPIRE OF LIGHT

PART I



CLOSE TO THE EDGE

CHAPTER ONE

One moment there was the emptiness of the vacuum; the next, the void was filled. All fourteen ships reverted to realspace in the same instant, their gray metal hulls gleaming in the light of the system's distant star. Their sublight engines kicked in, pushing them on ion flares toward their destination. Far behind them a broad gray wedge, two kilometers long, slipped through space.

From the bridge of the Imperial star destroyer *Resilience*, the convoy looked like a string of tiny jewels trailing toward the brown sphere of the planet ahead. Captain Por Dun stood at the head of the bridge, watching the ships and their destination through the dark lenses of her Kel Dor breathing mask. They proceeded in a calm line: fourteen heavy cargo haulers filled with industrial supplies, foodstuffs, agricultural tools, and more.

The supplies were certainly needed. It had been six years since the government on Bastion had authorized the establishment of a Yagai colony on Nesporis III. During the reign of Emperor Palpatine and his successor warlords, the industrious, insectoid Yagai people had been enslaved to build the Empire's mighty star destroyers at the Yaga Minor shipyard over their home planet. Those times were nearly a century gone, and the Empire was far

2 — LEGACY'S EDGE

from what it had been: Less powerful, perhaps, but also less cruel and more equal. The Nesporis colony was just one of a dozen worlds the government had allotted to the Yagai and other species native to Imperial space who'd been trapped under the Empire's heel for generations.

As a Kel Dor in a largely human navy, Por Dun appreciated the gesture. The Yagai who'd left their homeworld to tame and settle Nesporis III reminded her of her own grandparents, who'd left their planet behind to settle an uninhabited world just coreward of Imperial space in the wake of the Yuuzhan Vong War. Another civil war and a redraw of interstellar borders had shifted their planet into Imperial territory, but rather than face enslavement as they would have decades ago, they'd found opportunities to advancement newly opened for non-humans.

There was, therefore, an extra weight of history on Por Dun's shoulders as she watched the convoy slip toward the planet while *Resilience*, the only armed capital ship in the system, remained stationary outside Nesporis III's gravity well. She really, *really* did not want to screw this up.

She turned from the viewport, walked around the crew pit, and came to the destroyer's tactical station, where a row of young human officers were in their seats, all eyes on sensor readouts.

"Lieutenant Yaris," she said, "Report."

The gold-haired human woman looked up at Por Dun. "No signs of enemy activity."

"The sensor buoys behind the moon?"

"They report no activity either."

"And the fourth and fifth planets?"

"We're running deep scans now. Nothing visible."

Yaris knew as well as her captain that the enemy might well be hiding behind one of those planets, readying for a micro-jump that would drop them right on top of the convoy. Por Dun glanced at the tactical holo; the lead convoy vessel was entering Nesporis III's gravity well now. The others were only minutes behind. If the enemy was going to pounce, they'd do it now.

Por Dun found herself hoping for it. Otherwise, *Resilience* would have come all this way for nothing. As it was, the operation had been designed as perfect bait. The raiders who'd been attacking Imperial space for the past four months had been hitting convoys, mostly civilian, traveling in and out of systems near the edge of the Unknown Regions. Who they were, why they were attacking, what they wanted besides plunder and rampant destruction: these were all questions that needed answers.

Head of State Avaris had ordered military escorts for all convoys traveling in sectors bordering the Unknown Regions and attacks had decreased without ceasing entirely. In keeping *Resilience* back from the convoy, Por Dun was giving potential attackers a very tempting target, one they didn't get often anymore.

It was a risky plan, especially since the enemy was so hard to predict. They came in a motley assemblage of ships with never the same number. None of them had been taken alive, but if this gamble worked, they might finally learn how to stop these attacks once and for all.

The entire scheme had been cooked up by Por Dun's commanding officer, Admiral Davek Fel. If her orders had come from anyone else she'd have balked, but she and Fel had been through too much. The six weeks their frigate *Voidwalker* had spent behind enemy lines in what they now called the Senex-Juvex Rising had earned medals for its entire crew and jump-started many careers. Seventeen years later Por Dun had gone from ensign to captain, Fel from junior grade lieutenant to fleet admiral. That long, desperate fight to survive had made legends of them all.

"We're getting something," Yaris announced. "Out from the fifth planet."

"Shields up!" Por Dun called. "Comm, warn the convoy! Guns, prepare for firing solution."

She looked out the viewport to see distant flecks drop out of hyperspace on the edge of the planet's gravity well. Lights flared up and died far away. The battle had begun.

4 — LEGACY'S EDGE

Then, equally sudden, a pair of frigate-sized warships appeared off *Resilience's* bow. They immediately opened fire, spraying red laser blasts across the star destroyer's shields.

"Guns, fire when ready," Por Dun said. "Tactical, how's the convoy?"

"Hard to tell, sir." Yaris bit her lip. "The big haulers got stuck in the rear, they're being surrounded by... it looks like small starfighters or drones."

One of the many aggravating things about these raiders was that every time they showed up they'd have a new ship, weapon, or trick. It was like all the uncharted, unregistered races from the Unknown Regions were hurling themselves against the Imperial border as a messy, rampaging horde.

"What about the ion bombs?" Por Dun asked. One of the few patterns in these attacks was that the enemy would hurl some kind of shield-busting warhead that would not only overwhelm a ship's defenses but overload its electric systems and render it dead in space. The frigates trying to keep *Resilience* away from the convoy didn't seem to have any in stock, which confirmed Por Dun's suspicion that those warheads were precious and scarcely used.

"No ion bombs, yet, sir. We- ah, stang."

"Language, Lieutenant."

"Picking up three ion detonations. Lost contact with two ships."

"Which ones?"

"The Damorian heavies, Captain."

The two biggest, most tempting targets. Just as they'd hoped. With those cargo ships crippled in orbit, the raiders would start launching their boarding parties that would hijack the ships and jump them out of the system.

"Helm," she called, "Push us ahead. Get us past those frigates. Comm, signal Captain Verdon and request assistance. Tell all other ships that can fly to fall back to us. We'll protect them."

"What about the heavies?" asked Yaris.

"There's nothing we can do for them. It's over to our friends now."

Resilience would have its hands full battling off all those raiders. As for their boarding parties, they'd be in for a very unpleasant surprise. This entire trap had been Davek Fel's design from start to finish, and it had been his idea to snare the enemy using the invaluable secret weapon of a brave new Empire: Jedi Knights.

The deck shuddered under Arlen Fel's feet, nearly knocking him into the navigator seat, but he steadied himself as the helmsman called, "They've got us!"

"Boarding parties?" Arlen asked.

"Unknown, all systems are down," the navigator waved at his console, as dark as everything else on the bridge. Despite being half a kilometer long, the Damorian cargo vessel had a cramped cockpit with barely enough room for all twenty crew members. That was what made them tempting targets, of course: all attackers had to do was breach the one airlock located next to the crew quarters behind the bridge, then take the bridge to commandeer the vessel and all its cargo.

Arlen spun to the ship's captain. "Once I'm out, lock the blast door manually. Don't open it for *anything* except my authorization code."

"Understood," the captain nodded as an explosion flashed outside the cockpit. With all internal lights down its was glaringly bright. Arlen winced as he saw one of the smaller cargo ships, a Corellian mid-sized freighter, spin out in a ball of fire. The raiders were doing what they usually did, then: grab the most valuable ships, then destroy the rest. He only hoped *Resilience* would get here in time to protect the others.

Arlen unhooked his lightsaber from his belt, took a deep breath, and stepped out into the corridor. He waited until the blast doors slammed shut and locked in place, then jogged down the hall of the ship's small crew section to where a squadron of white-armored stormtroopers who'd already placed themselves in front of the airlock, weapons raised. With the stormtroopers were three more beings like himself, all dressed in brown robes over pale tunics.

6 — LEGACY'S EDGE

Arlen didn't bother to ask for a sitrep. They could all hear the awful grinding noise of the raiders trying to burn through the airlock seal. It wouldn't be long now. Despite the months of attacks, none of them had ever been taken alive. The most information that had been gleamed about them had come from the wreckage of destroyed ships, each of which had been crewed by aliens of a different species, most of them unknown to Imperial xenobiologists. The plan Arlen's brother had thrown together was meant to change that. The other big Damorian hauler was also staffed with a squad of troopers and four Jedi Knights; hopefully at least one team would be able to subdue their attackers and get some answers.

Arlen and the other Jedi held back behind the stormtroopers. As the noise got louder he glanced at the others: Deir Sinde with his trim black hair and beard, Rekkon Sholz with both hands tensely gripping his silver-bladed saber, Manh Wailar intently glaring the airlock, waiting for the explosion.

Arlen tried to sense the enemy in the Force. Beyond the intent and tension of the being around him he sensed a desperate, rapacious hunger, a *need* to ravage whatever lay beyond the airlock. Whoever was coming for them wouldn't be turned away at the sight of a stormtrooper squad.

When the airlock exploded the hatch burst inward. The Jedi were ready; they grabbed the metal door with the Force and flung it high enough to scrape the corridor ceiling, well above the heads of the crouched troopers. The sergeant, placed at the back of the formation between Arlen and Sholz, hurled a flash grenade into the smoke-filled portal. The trooper's helmets would compensate for the flare but the Jedi quickly hid their eyes; a half-second later the tang of the explosion, then a chorus of BlasTech rifles pouring laserfire into the gap.

The Jedi ignited their sabers and stepped into the open corridor that was now filled with smoke. With a wave of an arm, Wailar flushed the smoke back into the portal, hopefully into the faces of the enemy, though they were still invisible on their side of the airlock. All the while the stormtroopers kept firing.

After almost a minute of continuous shooting with no response, Arlen raised an arm and the guns fell silent. He and Wailar walked ahead, past the troopers, toward the dark blown-open airlock hatch from which no motion came.

"That can't be it," Wailar whispered, holding his saber in front of him with both hands to repel any attack.

"I can feel them" Arlen said, "In there. Waiting."

"Then what are they waiting *for*?"

For curious Jedi to walk into an ambush on other ship, Arlen suspected, but they couldn't both stay on their own sides of the airlock forever. One side was going to have to take the risk and it was exactly the kind of risk Jedi were suited for.

Arlen was about to call Sholz and Sinde forward when he heard a low buzzing sound from the other side. He jumped back just before they burst out of the airlock: a dozen spherical drones, each one the size of a human head. They immediately began spewing laser blasts and whirling around the compact corridor at dizzying speed. Arlen was able to get away, but one drone slammed hard into Wailar's torso, throwing him through the air to the end of the corridor.

Arlen swore and began deflecting laser blasts with his saber while Sholz dove after Wailar. Sinde, skilled both two blades or one, grabbed Wailar's fallen weapon with the Force and began batting back attacks with both hands. The stormtroopers filled the corridor with volleys of rifle-blasts. The drones were swirling around too fast for even the best marksman to track but in that cramped space they had no space to fly and the stormtroopers took out half of them in the first twenty seconds.

The remaining drones, however, slipped above the troopers' heads. A few raced down the hallway to the cockpit and began pounding the sealed blast doors. The others started jerking in the air above the branch point, raining laserfire down on the Jedi and troopers alike. As he darted for Wailar's body he saw that three stormtroopers had already fallen.

"What the hell are these things?" Sholz gasped as Arlen dropped beside them.

8 — LEGACY'S EDGE

"No idea. How is he?"

The other Jedi grimaced and placed a hand on Wailar's chest. Arlen spared a second to look away from the whirling, firing drones and saw that the impact had caved in the Jedi's chest. He realized there was no life signal in the Force. In the blink of an eye, a Jedi Knight had died.

From the insides of the other ship, a sound came. To Arlen it sounded like the baying of akk hounds. Then they charged: a horde of aliens with flat bodies and long limbs, each arm tipped by a jagged vibro-blade. The stormtroopers closest to the door were felled instantly as buzzing swords sheared through white armor and spilled blood. The barking aliens scrambled around the corridor for the blast doors as the drones overhead kept the remaining stormtroopers and Jedi pinned down and helpless.

That was when Arlen admitted to himself they were in trouble.

Even when *Resilience* pulled ahead, the frigates that had first moved to attack them didn't give up. They were ferocious but not stupid, and instead of trying to flank the star destroyer they avoided punishing broadsides by dropping behind it and pounding its aft shields.

The deck shuddered under Por Dun's boots. Two kilometers long and just six years off the yards at Kuat, the *Predator*-class star destroyer was one of the most capable capital ships in the Empire and should have been able to handle a mid-sized group of raiders with no single ship bigger than a *Kontos*-class frigate. The problem was, there were so many *kinds* of ships and none of them seemed to be following a coordinated attack pattern. Two boarding ships had latched onto the big Damorian freighters, yes, and the smaller Kuati and Corellian craft were trying to flee to *Resilience*'s protective umbrella, but the attackers were a chaotic swirl of different vessel types all trying to wreak as much havoc as possible. Tiny spherical drones were flying literal circles around *Resilience*'s TIE-X interceptors while starfighters big enough for living pilots were tearing the fleeing freighters to shreds. Por Dun wouldn't ask for

casualty reports until this was over, but she was sure they would be high.

"Sitrep on *Conviction*?" she asked the tactical officer.

"Confirmed inbound, should be here in less than ninety seconds," Lieutenant Yaris said. "Expected reversion zone at point oh-seven-six."

"What about the Damorian ships?"

"No reply from either. They're dead in space."

Por Dun was glad the humans on the bridge couldn't read Kel Dor faces; otherwise they'd see her anxiety. Captain Verdon's star destroyer had been holding at a fallback position, ready to respond to help any of three different convoys that were all potential targets for the raiders. Once *Conviction* got here the attacks would have no hope of winning; still, if the Jedi teams aboard the haulers didn't succeed in defeating and capturing their attackers, all of this would be for nothing.

A pair of Kuati freighters had just reached *Resilience*, and the destroyer's gunners adjusted their turbolaser fire onto the ships pursuing them. From the tactical display Por Dun could see that one was one of those frigate-sized vessels that spewed out hundreds of small drones instead of snubfighters. The other was a blunt corvette-sized ship of markedly different design, slow but armed to the teeth and heavily shielded.

Por Dun had no idea where all these ships had come from or why they were working with limited cooperation to attack Imperial space. It was almost like a dozen different races from the Unknown Regions had banded together to launch a wave attack, but that attack was barely-coordinated and limited to plunder and mayhem, not conquest. For someone who'd studied combat tactics and long-term strategy at the Academy, the absence of them was baffling.

Then Lieutenant Yaris announced, "*Conviction* has arrived, Captain."

She needn't have raised her voice; Por Dun could see the grey wedge of the second star destroyer appear off their port bow, at the edge of the planet's gravity well. *Conviction* was moving inbound fast and was already deploying TIEs to lead the charge.

10 — LEGACY'S EDGE

"Captain," the comm lieutenant called, "Hail from *Conviction*. They're requesting sitrep and instructions."

It was mildly embarrassing for a former tactical officer, but all Por Dun could do was shrug. "Tell them targets of opportunity, Lieutenant. It's a mess out here. We'll clean it up together."

The second *Conviction* decanted from hyperspace, its hangar began pumping out fighters. The bulk of the ships were venerable TIE-X interceptors, sleek and nimble vessels with folded ion panels jutting out from either side of a ball cockpit. Launched behind the first TIE-X squadron were four TIE Daggers, prototype fighters with four solar panels that radiated out from the center and stabbed forward either side of the cockpit, vaguely like the S-foils of an old Alliance X-wing. They were bigger than TIE-Xs but just as maneuverable, larger targets but more heavily shielded, boasting proton torpedo launchers in addition to heavy laser cannons. There were, in Marasiah Valtor Fel's opinion, the best snubfighter model she'd ever piloted, and she'd been the one to personally push for its use by the Jedi Knights protecting Imperial space.

The four Jedi aboard *Conviction* had expected to be sent into one trigger snare or another, and Marasiah wasn't surprised to end up in the one her brother-in-law was stuck in. Arlen had an uncanny ability to find himself in the center of trouble.

As the four Jedi TIE fighters streaked toward the battle zone, in which *Resilience* sat in the center, she noted that the raiders had barely altered their attack pattern despite the second the second star destroyer and fighter wing bearing down on them. They seemed intent on dealing out as much destruction as possible to *Resilience* and the surviving freighters clustered around it for protection. Far aside from the battle zone, two Damorian heavy freighters sat dead in space on the edge of the planet's orbit. Arlen, she knew, would be in one of those.

He was too far away to try and touch him with the Force. Instead she patched her comm line into *Resilience's* bridge and tried to hail the destroyer.

After a second a voice said, "This is *Resilience*. Go ahead."

"This is Knight One," Marasiah said. "Requesting status of the Jedi defense teams."

"Nothing to give, Knight One. Both ships got knocked out by ion bombs. No contact since."

"Requesting permission to take my flight and investigate."

"Permission granted," the comm lieutenant said, not even bothering to check with his captain. Por Dun had probably given him instructions.

Marasiah switched comm freqs. "Knights, on my lead. We're going in."

She broke her flight away from the charge of TIE-Xs and vectored toward the drifting Damorian haulers. Daggers had a more sophisticated sensor package than normal TIEs and she picked up life signs from both ships, but that was all. A different type of boarding craft attached to either ship; hopefully that meant they'd get to capture and interrogate two different species of raiders and get a better idea of just how and why they were doing all this.

But that came later. They were close enough now to see the lightless viewports of the hauler's cockpit and Marasiah reached out with the Force to find her brother-in-law. She'd spent years training under Arlen to become a Jedi Knight and his Force signature was instantly recognizable. He was in the closer freighter and clearly panicked.

"They need help!" she called. "Knight Two, with me. We'll take the closer freighter. Three and Four, with the second. Can anyone see docking ports on the boarding ships?"

Marasiah dropped back so Katrin Mull could dip close in Knight Two and get a better look. Negative, Lead. Looks like their only airlock is latched onto the hauler.

"Then we go in the other side. Those ships have ventral airlocks in the cargo sections, halfway down the hull."

"Might take us a long time to get up front, One."

"Then we'd better move fast. With me, Two."

By the time they managed to shoot down the last of the swirling drones, the flat-bodied aliens had already reached the blast doors

12 — LEGACY'S EDGE

and were hacking away steadily with their arm-mounted vibroblades. The weapons were stronger than anything Arlen had ever seen except for lightsabers; in a minute or two they'd be through the door and into the cockpit. A few of the aliens hung back, using long-barrel-blaster rifles to keep the Jedi and surviving stormtroopers pinned at the point where corridor branched. The stormtroopers had been exchanging fire with the enemy all the while, now using deadly bolts after stun shots had failed to affect the aliens' strange bodies. Even then, they'd only knocked down two of over a dozen.

When his brother had proposed this scheme Arlen's first response had been to remind him that Jedi weren't infallible, that they could make mistakes and be killed like anybody else. Wailar's body prone on the deck between Sholz and a pair of stormies was proof of that; Arlen was afraid they'd get more proof soon.

"We can charge them," Deir Sinde said as he crouched next to Arlen and took a peek around the corner, then quickly retreated before catching a faceful of laserfire.

Arlen grunted acknowledgement. Their whole goal here was to capture the enemy rather than kill them, but if they changed it would end up in a mess of sliced-up corpses, some of them Jedi, maybe his own.

He closed his eyes, breathed in deep, and touch the Force. The aliens were still emanating the hungry, almost animalistic need to get through the door. The stormtroopers and Jedi were all tense and fearful, the crew on the other side of the blast doors increasingly panicked.

Then he felt it again, like a clarion call: Marasiah, saying she was on the way.

"Hold out for just a little longer," Arlen said. "Backup's coming."

"How much?" asked Sinde.

"Enough," Arlen said, and prayed it was true. He tried to send Marasiah a warning through the Force. He couldn't tell if she got it; the aliens at the door unleashed a chorus of barking noises, and when Sinde cautiously peeked out he swore.

"They're almost through," he glared at Arlen. "It's now or never, Master."

Arlen looked to the stormtrooper sergeant. "Can we get another flash-bang?"

The sergeant removed a grenade from his belt. Arlen told them to provide cover as he and the two remaining Jedi prepared to charge. The sergeant tossed the grenade straight into the middle of the hallway branch point; Sholz gave it a simple tap in the Force and sent it rolling straight into the middle of the aliens.

Arlen closed his eyes right before the flare burned the hallway white. Then he, Sholz and Sinde raced for the source of the burst.

Stun bolts might not have worked on the aliens but they could still be blinded; broad flat hands pawed at their four-eyed faces as the Jedi attacked. Arlen used the Force to slam two of them hard against the sliced-up wreckage of the blast door and hoped it would keep them down. Sholz cleaved a rifle apart in the enemy's hands, while Sinde sheared off a barrel. Another alien swiped at Arlen with two buzzing blades and he had to backflip in the cramped corridor to avoid them. On the way down he swiped out, cutting through the blade on another alien's arm.

He felt a surge of relief- he'd been afraid the blades were lightsaber-proof like cortosis or *beskar*- but triumph died fast as another's pain seared his mind. He spun on one heel and saw Sholz staring at the bloodied stump of one arm, cut off at the elbow. A lightsaber's superheated blade immediately cauterized a wound; the vibro-weapons did nothing of the sort, and bright arterial blood jetted out, splashing Sinde in the face.

Just as Sholz started to scream, Arlen used the Force to hurl him back toward the stormtroopers, out of the fight. It was a costly second; another alien lunged forward and the tip of its blade caught Arlen in the side. He gasped, staggered, tried to contain the pain as yet another alien lurched forward, both arms raised high, ready to cleave him in two.

Then the arms were gone and Arlen's attacker was holding the jutting stubs of jointless limbs above its head. A brown robe ballooned, then fell over the stunned alien. Suddenly Marasiah was

14 — LEGACY'S EDGE

there, rearing back to deliver a strong kick that took the creature in the torso and slammed it into the wall.

She used the Force to push Arlen against the same bulkhead, then went to work. Sinde and the Jedi who'd come with Marasiah were already tackling the remaining aliens. The creatures seemed surprised by the new attackers but there was no place to fall back to; the first one to try for its ship for riddled with blasts from the stormtroopers still at the hallway branch.

When the last one fell, Marasiah shut off her white-bladed lightsaber and took Arlen by the shoulder. "How bad is it?"

"Shallow, I think," he winced, clasping his side. A quick glance saw his tunic stained by blood.

"Medic!" Marasiah called.

A stormtrooper was there in a second. As he dropped on one knee to examine Arlen's wound, the Jedi asked him, "What about Sholz? Tell me he's okay?"

"Lost an arm and a lot of blood," the medic grunted. "Sir, lay down. I'm going to have to stitch you up."

"Tell me about Sholz. Will he—" Suddenly the pain was too much. The medic and Marasiah both helped lower Arlen so he sat on the deck, back against the bulkhead. As the medic crouched low and fetched a suture gun from his belt, Arlen looked over the stormtrooper's back and saw the slumped form of the alien Marasiah had disabled.

"You need to restrain them all. No telling... Which can still fight... Or...."

"These creatures are like nothing I've ever seen," the medic said. "But we'll do what we can."

Arlen remembered the crew in the cockpit might still be waiting for know what was going on. Before he could raise his voice and find the strength to talk the entire hallway shuddered, and he heard a harsh scraping noise.

"They're trying to run!" the stormtrooper sergeant called. "Airlock door's already sealed."

Arlen grabbed Marasiah's forearm and squeezed. "We need to capture it. Need to know everything we can about those ships."

The woman nodded and plucked a comlink from her tunic. "Knight Three, report."

A static-scrambled voice said, "Still shipbound, One. Second freighter is secure."

"First freighter is also secure. Our boarding craft is trying to break free."

"Understood. I see it now. Firing engines."

"Take those engines out but do *not* destroy the ship. We want it intact for examination."

"Understood. Three out."

"Can they do it?" Arlen asked as soon as she shut off the link. "Those ships are fast, they might still have defenses—"

Marasiah grabbed him by the shoulder, pinning him to the wall. "For once, let someone *else* do the hard part."

The arrival of *Conviction* wasn't the end of the fight, but it made the end inevitable. The raiders seemed in denial of that fact at first; they kept on attacking, tearing up two more unarmed freighters before the combined TIE wings tore them apart in turn. As she watched it all play out on *Resilience's* bridge, Por Dun was more perplexed than anything else. The raiders simply didn't have the firepower to fight off two star destroyers with full fighter complements. Instead of fleeing, they continued to attack with a frankly suicidal ferocity, as though they were determined to kill as many Imperial ships as possible before dying in turn. Pirates who stole cargo ships shouldn't behave like that, yet they did.

In the end, the two frigates on *Resilience's* aft and a few corvette-analog ships finally turned and ran. Por Dun gave orders for the TIEs to pursue in hopes of crippling and capturing the ships, but as the whole fight took place on the edge of Nesporis III's gravity well, the raiders were able to jump to hyperspace quickly, leaving more questions than answers behind.

And yet, perhaps not. When the last raiders jumped away, Por Dun immediately went over to the tactical station. "Anything from the Damorian freighters?"

16 — LEGACY'S EDGE

Lieutenant Yaris shook her head. "Still dead in space, Captain. Wait, it looks like one of the boarding ships had detached from the hauler and is making a run for it."

Por Dun chose to take that as a good sign. "Do we have ships close enough to stop it?"

"Two Jedi fighters in the air. They're chasing it now."

Por Dun watched the tactical holo as Yaris zoomed in to show the two TIEs giving chase. The boarding ship didn't get far; the Jedi must have used surgical strikes to disable its engines, leaving it to drift in space.

"That's it, Captain," Yaris said. "No other hostile activity reported inside the battle zone."

Por Dun nodded and went over to the comm station, where she requested a hail on the Jedi fighters. The sensing patched in the call, but she had to wait for over a full minute before a crisp voice replied, "This is Knight Three."

"Requesting sitrep, Knight Three."

"Both freighters are secure. Attackers are neutralized."

"Prisoners?"

A hesitant pause. "Situation is still being assessed, but the boarding ship we disabled is intact. Recovery crews should be warned the enemy is not affected, repeat *not* affected by stun blasts."

"I'll make sure to tell them. We'll have to try alternative methods. What about casualties?"

"Still being assessed. I understand at least one Jedi and multiple stormtroopers dead. Injuries also."

"I'll dispatch medical teams to both freighters. You did good work, Knight Three."

"Just my duty, Captain. Knight Three out."

When she shut off the connection with the Jedi, Por Dun paused to reflect on how unrecognizable the Empire of today was from what had gone before. History was an unpredictable thing. That thought encouraged her, then filled her with foreboding. She looked out the viewport to see gnarled wreckage drifting just past *Resilience's* bow: the broken ruin of an alien spaceship from an unknown people with incomprehensible goals.

She wasn't sure she wanted to see what history had in store for the Empire next, but she'd be there all the same.

CHAPTER TWO

Shifting slightly within the crash webbing of his seat, Davek Fel craned his neck to look over the shoulder of the pilot in front of him. The blackness of cold space and distant stars was steadily eclipsed by the rising swell of planet below. It was a world with no oceans, no distinct continents. Csilla appeared to be a great marble of textured blue-white ridges and mountains, a geography of slow-drifting and grinding glaciers that encased the planet's surface in miles-deep layers of ice.

Despite being such an inhospitable planet, one that required the constant import of foodstuffs and supplies from other Chiss colony worlds, Csilla was a capital of over eight billion beings, almost entirely Chiss and every one of them living in complex cities bored beneath the layers of ice. Csilla had always seemed a marvel to Davek, fascinating and forbidding at the same time, but to the old man in the seat beside him it was more than that. To a young Jagged Fel, Csilla had been home.

As the shuttle shuddered into the atmosphere and continued its dive to the plain white surface, Davek leaned a little closer to his father and asked, "It never changes, does it?"

The furrows on Jagged's brow deepened in thought. He was past his eightieth year now; his hair had gone white, his body moved

slowly and was bowed with age, but the agility of his mind was apparent in his dark clear eyes.

"The Ascendancy has always tried to present itself as a force of constancy in a dangerous universe," Jagged said at last in the thoughtful, measured tone Davek was expecting. "But everything changes. Of course it does. The Ascendancy has changed a lot since I was young. More than I could have ever expected at the time."

As they tore through thin cloud layers Davek asked, "What kind of ways?"

"This Chiss used to see every other political faction, every league or race, as a threat. Given some of the threats it's faced that's understandable. But gradually they started to realize they can work *with* the Empire and the Alliance. They can trade some advantages for others and reach mutually beneficial arrangements."

"You're saying they've learned basic political skills."

Jag smiled slightly. "The Chiss have always known how to play politics. Mostly it was with each other. Slowly, though, they've found advantages in playing it with others."

"But they're still isolationist," Davek reminded. "Firmly so." He was under no illusions that the Ascendancy would throw everything they wanted at them, even with family on their side.

"The Chiss credo is to never attack unless attacked first," Jag said. "There are far worse ones."

"Even if it means standing by when you could help people being attacked and killed?"

"The Chiss have a saying about a tunnel carved with good intentions."

"I know. I've heard it from Aunt Wyn several times."

"Good." The shuttle shook as it hit the lower atmosphere and Jagged grabbed both armrests. "Then you know what to expect."

Strong cold winds buffeted their ship for the rest of their flight to the surface, and Davek was relieved when they finally slipped into the mouth of the tunnel that led to the landing complex. They raced past great walls of startlingly blue ice until the tunnel spread wide and they settled into a great open dome of durasteel-reinforced ice over a kilometer wide. He counted a dozen other

20 — LEGACY'S EDGE

transport ships also set down on this pad, all of Chiss make. Technical information was one of the things the Ascendancy had been sharing with the Empire recently and he saw traces of Imperial design in some of them.

The welcoming party was basically what he'd expected: a dozen Chiss soldiers with blue skin, black uniforms, and rifles slung over one shoulder, arrayed in two columns. In front of them were two more figures, both in uniforms but otherwise totally different. One was a Chiss male a little younger than Davek who stood out against most of the others from his race by sporting a neatly trimmed blue-black beard. To his side was a human woman with white hair cropped short and an unlikely set of silver admiral's stripes on her shoulders. Wynssa Fel was still in her seventies and managed to stand a little straighter and steadier than her brother, though both their faces sagged with age.

As a show of respect between officer, Davek did what he always did: raise one hand over his brow in salute. Wynssa did the same, as did her adopted son, Meshk'anar'ntiola. Jagged, soldier days long gone, stayed with his hands at his sides and a little smile on his face.

When Wyn lowered her hand she looked Davek up and down. She coolly observed, "You're looking more like your father every day."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Davek said. It was something he'd been told often. It wasn't just the similar height or facial structure; like his father, he'd suffered a glancing wound to the forehead that left a scar arcing off his brow and a shock of white hair that continued up his scalp. His father's head had turned fully white, but Davek still had decades before time erased the shock from his own hair.

Wyn looked to Jagged. "It looks like Bastion's been treating you well."

"The doctors haven't maimed me yet. Yours?"

"They've sufficed. I've had to refer them Imperial doctors for human physiological advice from time to time."

"Well, as long as they learn." Jagged looked to Kanarn. "I'm surprised to see you here. I thought your ship would be out patrolling the border."

"It is," Kanarn nodded. "I got special dispensation for a week's leave."

"From a high-ranking admiral, I'm sure." Jag smirked at his sister. "All right. Let's get some place private. Some place *warm*. Old people don't like the cold. Everyone knows that."

"Old humans," Wynssa said. "Older Chiss actually prefer it."

"I remember," Jag stepped forward and hooked his arm on hers. "Come on, show me how *you've* been keeping warm, Wyn."

A speeder with a closed roof was waiting to whisk them through more ice-bored tunnels and into the artificial labyrinth that passed for a city on Csilla. These underground living zones always made Davek feel claustrophobic; they possessed none of the open spaces or green parks that marked cities on Bastion. He'd figured long ago that the physically compact and regimented living spaces Chiss grew up in set the standard for their society as a whole.

As they rode into the glacier colony Davek's father and aunt sat in the two seats behind the driver, while Davek and Kanarn were in the two behind them. Their parents spoke in soft, dim tones, leaving the two of them- cousins despite their different races and societies- to find something to talk about.

It wasn't as hard as it could have been; they were both soldiers, and Davek and his father had come to Csilla on what was essentially military business.

"How far away is your ship?" Davek asked. "Is it on the border?"

Kanarn nodded. "Most of ours are now. You must have noticed how sparse the home fleet looking coming in."

"I did. But despite all that's been happening, they've never attacked you?"

"Everyone in our part of space knows our rules. Don't attack us and we'll leave them alone. If they *do* make the first strike..." He shrugged. "Examples have been made in the past."

Davek had heard stories from his father about wars the Chiss Ascendancy had fought in. His grandparents had given birth to six

22 — LEGACY'S EDGE

children: four sons and two daughters. Only Jagged and Wynssa had survived long enough to have families of their own.

"I'm still a little surprised," he said. "We'll show you all the data soon, but from what we've seen of these raiders they don't seem... disciplined."

"Not like a professional army, you mean."

"More than that. Our analysts propose there's at least thirteen distinct types of ships taking part in these attacks. That's thirteen different non-human species at least. Some we've been able to identify based on information from the Ascendancy libraries, like Vagaari and Tylonians, but others are still a mystery."

"But they're fighting as one force."

"Yes and no. They sweep in like a tide. They steal what they think's valuable and destroy the rest. They don't use any discernable tactics beyond that so they're hard to counter. We lost fourteen convoys to them before we turned them back at Nesporis, and that's because we laid a trap and used the Jedi against them. We lost one knight in the fight and Arlen was injured. He's still recuperating."

"Ah. I was wondering why he wasn't here. What about Marasiah?"

"She was there too. Unharmred, thankfully, but she stayed on Bastion."

"Your sons?"

"With their grandmother."

"Jedi training, both of them."

"That's right." Davek allowed a wistful smile. Sometimes it felt like a lifetime since he'd welcomed a sullen but pretty young TIE fighter pilot onto *Voidwalker*. He'd had no intimation then what the coming months would bring- the chaos and danger of the Senex-Juvex Rising- and certainly not the coming decades. The seventeen intervening years had brought them through a whirlwind of changes: Davek's climbing the ranks thanks to his new status as war hero, Marasiah resigning her commission to train as a Jedi, then marriage, then Vitor's birth, then Roan's. When they'd been expecting their second child Davek had wondered constantly whether Roan would prove to be Force-sensitive like his older

brother. Growing up without it, he'd too often felt himself in Arlen's shadow, attached to his older brother and Jedi Master mother but inevitably apart from them. Roan was still young, only nine years old, but he was displaying the same natural talent that Vitor and Arlen had as children.

"I sometimes think it's a pity," Kanarn said, jarring Davek from his reverie.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said it's a pity these Jedi talents have never been prevalent among the Chiss."

"Ah. Well, there used to be no Jedi in Imperial Space. Bad history, you understand. But Force-sensitive beings were born every year, they just weren't being recognized. My mother had to search far and wide to find them, and even then she missed ones."

"Like your wife."

"Exactly." Davek himself had been the first to recognize Marasiah's talent during the six weeks *Voidwalker* had spent cheating death behind enemy lines.

"Still," Kanarn went on, "I've read certain species are more prone to Force-sensitivity than others."

"That's true."

"The Chiss might just be... unlucky." Kanarn's lips settled into a grim line. They both knew that the Ascendancy had sent a single young man to train as a Jedi, that he'd been apprenticed to Davek's mother and brother, and that he'd been tragically lost in Senex-Juvex. Since then, the Ascendancy had volunteered no others, if they'd found them at all.

"Do you *really* think the Jedi could be useful to the Chiss?" Davek asked.

"You just said the raiders would have smashed another convoy if it weren't for them."

"That's true."

"And I've heard they've made great progress in rebuilding Senex-Juvex. The Justice and Unity Trials, I believe they're called."

"That's also true."

"And the Alliance had a Jedi Chief of State for many years."

24 — LEGACY'S EDGE

"All true," Davek conceded. Growing up he'd constantly found himself defending the Jedi to endless people raised on the classic Imperial propaganda that the Order was a child-stealing cult. The Jedi's profile had risen considerably since then, thanks in no small part to the Jedi chief of state who'd led the Alliance for over a decade.

"Still," Davek said, "The Jedi aren't an arm of the Empire. They're a separate entity unaffiliated with any government. They act on our request, when we request them, but only when and if they decide to take up our offer."

"Hmmm," Kanarn looked thoughtful. "They almost sound like mercenaries."

"Except the Jedi don't accept payment for what they do. They do it because it's *right*. They act from a moral imperative, not a political one."

"You say it like those are easily separated."

Davek hesitated. He was pretty sure Kanarn wasn't trying to drag him to some rhetorical trap like the anti-Jedi propagandists of old, but the Chiss did have a point.

"The Jedi seem to have found a way," he concluded, a little weakly. "They serve no power but the Force. The way I see it, if the Jedi decide to stop cooperating with us it will mean we've gone astray somehow."

"You see them as a moral compass?"

Davek had never quite thought of it that way; having been born Force-blind into a family half-filled with Jedi, he'd often looked on that other half with feelings of envy and emptiness. Now that he'd married a Jedi and fathered two children who were training to be the same, those feelings had gradually been replaced by something else, something he hadn't thought to name until Kanarn did it for him.

"I trust their judgment on right and wrong more than anyone else's," Davek said, thinking of his mother and brother and wife. "So yes, that's not a bad way to put it."

"Do you think the Jedi can save you from these raiders?"

"I think the Empire will save itself. But as long as we have the Jedi on our side, it will be a lot easier."

Kanarn nodded, either understanding or agreement. The speeder slowed and Davek turned his attention outside. The speeder slowed to a drift that took them through a pair of heavy blast doors set in frames inside ice-walled tunnels. From there the speeder settled in a metal box of a garage, the doors opened, everyone began to get out.

The Fel family estate on Csilla had been set up by Davek's grandfather, Imperial flying ace turned Ascendancy general Baron Soontir Fel. Jagged had forged a life for himself outside Chiss space but Wynssa had remained, climbing to the status of human admiral in a very non-human navy and inheriting her father's home. Like the rest of Csilla's under-ice habitats it was utterly unprepossessing, cold and sterile from the outside no matter how adorned the windowless interior chambers were. Every time Davek had visited his grandfather's estate he'd left with gratitude he'd grown up on Bastion instead.

Still, his father stood where he was, withered hand braced against the side of the speeder, looking at the portal into the estate with a smile creasing his face.

"It may not look like much, but here it is," Jagged said. "Home sweet home."

Most incredibly, it really did feel like home. Csilla had changed much since Jagged was a boy, yes, but it had changed less than the Empire, the Alliance, the Jedi Order, or anything else he could think of. Wyn had preserved much of the family estate complex they'd grown up in while making modifications as needed. The room in which Jagged had slept as a teen, for example- for a few years shared with his older brother Chak- was the same one Kanarn had used. Wyn had since converted it into a guest bedroom, which allowed Jag to spend the night between the very same walls in which he'd slept as a youth, dreaming of defending the Ascendancy against all the savage threats of the Unknown Regions while indulging curiosity about the galaxy beyond Chiss space.

But there was more than just nostalgia to indulge in. He and Davek had come here for a purpose. Once everything was settled, the four of them gathered in the estate's living room to talk it over.

Davek began by explaining, "We were able to capture seven alien raiders from two separate groups at Nesporis III. One group, the one Arlen and Marasiah fought, belonged to race you'll recognize as the Tylonians. We'd like to formally thank the Chiss embassy on Bastion for helping us with the interrogation session."

Jag had encountered Tylonians before, but they were unknown to most of the so-called civilized galaxy. He knew nothing of their strange barking language, though, and they'd had to call on the Chiss to translate. The embassy had already relayed the contents of that investigation back to the Ascendancy and in turn to Wyn.

"The seconds session was a little different," Davek said. "The attackers belonged to an alien race unfamiliar to us, but we were able to communicate using Sy Bisti. Since the trader's tongue sufficed, we had no need to call on help from the Ascendancy."

"But you'll share the contents of their interrogation with us now?" Kanarn raised a blue-black brow.

"That was our intent from the start."

"The Empire's intent, or *your* intent?" asked Wyn.

"My intent as an Imperial admiral, with full approval from Supreme Commander Darakon," Davek said firmly. Darakon had given him a lot of leeway as commander of most of the forces now strung out to protect the Empire's border with uncharted space, but sharing intelligence with the Chiss has been specifically approved by the commander of the Imperial navy and the elected head of state, Neela Avaris.

"Does it differ from what the Tylonians told you?" asked Kanarn.

"Frankly, the Tylonians didn't tell us much, as I'm sure you know. This other race identified themselves as Pal'shoran. Does that ring a bell?"

Wyn nodded. "They've abutted our space. Sometimes they've allied with the Vagaari and other times they've fought them, though the Pal'shoran aren't usually as violent as Vagaari. They're a

nomadic race. They say their homeworld was destroyed centuries ago. Some of them are traders but they've been known to turn to pillage."

"That goes with that they've told us. I should note that while we didn't encounter any Vagaari ships at Nesporis III, they've shown up in other raids."

"What else did they tell you?" asked Kanarn.

"A lot of it was the same as what the Tylonians said. They banded together with other races with the promise of plunder. They said they've been ravaging their way through the Unknown Regions for almost two standard years." Davek pointedly looked at Wyn.

"We've been aware of violence sweeping across certain regions," she acknowledged the accusation. "It never directly threatened us, so we deemed it none of our concern. Was there any mention of Chiss space from the Pal'shoran?"

"Our interrogators did bring that up. The Pal'shoran said they weren't crazy enough to start a war with your people. In fact, they'd been given instructions not to."

"Instructions from whom?"

"That's where it gets interesting." Davek leaned forward a little. "We asked them that questions and they kept on insisting they got instructions from masters. We asked them who the masters were. They kept on repeating just that, they were *masters*. When we asked they said they weren't Pal'shoran. They didn't seem to know *what* species the leaders were. None of the Pal'shoran we captured had even seen or spoken with them, which shouldn't be that surprising, since they were just an assault team."

"Still," Jagged spoke up, "If I were being sent on the front lines of an attack wave against Imperial space I'd want to know who *my* masters were."

"Agreed. Now, we interrogated the Pal'shoran first because we had Sy Bysti programmed into our translator droids. We had to wait a few more days to interrogate the Tylonians with the Ascendancy's help."

"I've read the transcripts thoroughly," Kanarn's forehead creased in thought. "I remember the Tylonians being asked the

same question. They said they'd been ordered to attack Imperial space by their 'king and queen.' They said they'd been promised bounties and riches from everything they pillaged."

Davek nodded. "According to the translators your embassy sent, the Tylonians were using an idiom with certain religious overtones. As in, they were being charged by divinely appointed leaders."

"From what we know about them, the Tylonians have been organized into a hierarchical military society for centuries. There used to be a certain religious element as well but that was centuries ago, before they expanded beyond their home system. We thought that was curious."

"So did we, which is why we went back to the Pal'shoran for more questions. But first we did a little more research and found that the Sy Bysti terms the Pal'shoran were using- the ones our droid were translating as 'master'- was also an idiom, also with religious roots. While the term refers to strong leaders in the colloquial sense, it literally means 'king and queen' too."

Wyn frowned. "Are you saying some Melorchs have bound together a dozen different species with nothing in common for some kind of crusade? That sounds..."

"Unbelievable, I know," said Davek. "But when we adjusted the translating software on our droid we started getting some more interesting things. They started referring to their leaders as two separate and specific beings. They described a king of storms and a queen of the night."

Wyn's frowned deepened. "What does *that* mean?"

Davek spread his palms. "We're hoping you could tell us. We don't know anything about the Pal'shoran. Are we missing some kind of reference?"

"I'm not an expert on Pal'shoran culture, but I can look into it for you." She leaned back in the sofa and crossed her arms over her chest. "Frankly, I hope it *is* some cultural reference. A king of storms and queen of the night are not enemies I'd wish to face."

"We may have to," Jagged said grimly. "I don't expect these raids to abate just because we destroyed the one at Nesporis III. After

these interrogations I'm frankly expecting them to ramp up. Our attackers seemed imbued with some fanatical purpose that still doesn't make sense, but we know it's dangerous and it won't be turned back by one battle."

"The Ascendancy will share any information we have that might help you."

"Are you talking about archival records?" Davek asked, "Or are you willing to share real-time intelligence."

Wyn and Kanarn shifted on the couch in awkward silence. Jag's sister said, "For now the former. I will see about the latter. The Ascendancy will not give you access to *everything*... But I believe we can put a system in place to accommodate requests."

"We're going to need that at least," Davek said firmly. "We know you're watching how these fleets are moving outside your borders. If we know that too we can estimate where attacks will come next and stop them. We're talking about saving millions of Imperial lives, maybe billions."

"I think you're being a little dramatic," said Kanarn. "They're not even an organized fleet."

"Thousands of years ago, back when the Mandalorians were all about slaughter and pillage, they almost brought down the whole Republic," Jagged said. "These raiders aren't that strong but the Empire isn't either. And frankly, I'm just as worried about what's happening to us on the *inside*."

"What do you mean?" Wyn asked.

Jag sighed. "Paranoia is rampant. You'd expect that, but there's more. All these attacks are being done by non-humans and it's stirring up anti-alien feeling across the Empire, even against species like Muuns or Yagai that have their homeworlds in Imperial space."

"People are frightened, not just on the border but in Bastion, Muunlist, Jaemus, all the major worlds," Davek added. "It doesn't matter what these raiders can or can't do. It's about the fear they instill in people."

"I understand," said Wyn. "And I will talk to people about setting up some intelligence sharing between our governments."

Davek took a datacard from his pocket and set it on the low table in front of her. "This a recording, original with translations, of our sessions with the Pal'shoran. Consider this the opening exchange."

Wyn reached out and palmed it. "I'll tell them exactly that."

They tried to move the conversation to more familial topics after that. Wyn said her husband was offworld but would return in a day. Kanarn started talking a little bit more about this role as a captain and that in turn provoked Davek into explaining a little more about his responsibilities as a fleet admiral.

After the two younger man had dispersed, Jag and his sister remained in the living room, watching each other across the table. Jagged remarked, "They have a lot in common, don't they?"

"I'm sure you've noticed." Wyn sunk back in the sofa. "I'm not sure how *you* feel, but I'm glad you had at least one son who didn't fall onto the Jedi path."

Jag had to smirk; Wyn had changed a lot since she was a bratty and free-spirited child pestering her stiff older brother, but she could still be very blunt. "I am too, if we're being honest."

"He takes after you. Arlen takes after your wife. I suppose it's an even split. What about your grandchildren?"

"Who can say? They're both going to be Jedi. Vitor is older and he's already getting a little reckless. He wants to see more of the galaxy, do great deeds, have adventures..."

"He's been spending too much time with Arlen, then."

Jag shrugged since he couldn't deny it. "Roan's a little harder to read. They usually are at that age. He's only nine but he seems very thoughtful, a little serious. More introverted."

"Like you, then?"

"Was I? I can't remember being nine years old and you were barely born."

"True. Like Davek, then."

"I suppose."

"And what about Arlen's daughter? Where does she fit in?"

Jag didn't have to think about that. "Very much like Vitor. Not quite as strong in the Force but still capable, and she wants to be a

Jedi very much." Vitor and Marin Fel had been born just months apart, grown up and trained together. The cousins were as close as siblings. To Jag, who'd so often felt torn from his family by war and distance, it was a blessing to see his grandchildren grow up close, in a galaxy at peace.

"I'd like to meet them," Wyn said. "I've only seen Vitor once."

"You could always come to Imperials space and see them, you know."

Wyn gave a shrug of her own. Forty years ago, during the initial thaw in relations between the Chiss and the Empire, she'd been posted to the embassy in Bastion. The Ascendancy had clearly thought her race and family background would make her a suitable liaison. Instead it had proven to everyone that despite the occasional lapse, Wyn was culturally Chiss to the core. In a strange way that episode seemed to have helped Wyn; it had erased her superiors' doubts about possible double loyalties and cleared the way for her to ascend to the senior admiral's rank she held now.

"You *should* come and see us," Jag repeated with quiet insistence. "Once all this is over. We can bring both sides of the family together, even if it's for a little while."

"You don't want your grandchildren to see where you grew up?"

Jag looked around the familiar sitting-room. "This is just a place. I'm glad it's still here. I'm glad I can come back to it. But I'm more proud of what I've done since I left."

Wynssa had never left; the one time she'd tried she'd regretted it. To soften the wince on her face he added, "You should be proud too, Wyn. Children, grandchildren, leaving our marks on the governments we served and making the galaxy a safer place. Those are things to be proud of. And they're the things we need to safeguard."

"You're thinking about your legacy, then."

Jag lifted a hand: thin, marked by wrinkles and swelled veins. He held it in front of him and watched it tremor with age. His hands had once belonged to one of the best fighter pilots in the galaxy, but that was many decades ago.

32 — LEGACY'S EDGE

"I only have so much time left," he said simply. "I want to make sure what I've had was well spent."

A smile softened Wyn's lined face. "I think it was, Jagged."

"I need your help to be sure of that."

Wyn held up her hand, showing the datacard tucked by thumb against palm. The first exchange of a new partnership. "Don't worry," she said. "You can count on me."

CHAPTER THREE

They sat on opposite sides of the chamber, two old men glaring at one another, an equal mix of aggression and defensiveness on their faces. To the audience assembled in the room, it was plain to see. Through the Force, Jade Skywalker could feel so much more. The man on the right, Halpern, was trying hard to cling to old memories, old anger, because they kept doubt and guilt away. The other, Sevlak, was much more defensive. His mind was running over anticipated attacks and expected parries, though Jade couldn't get a sense of exactly what that was, not yet.

A curious aspect of the Alliance's Justice and Unity trials in the Senex and Juvex Sectors was that the Jedi who arbitrated were supposed to go into them totally ignorant of the people and events being tried. The theory was that by relying solely on the Force as a guide the Jedi would be able to concentrate on the people involved and peer more deeply into their hearts and minds to gain a fuller picture of why they'd done what they'd done. That was the real purpose of these trials; to get to the *why* instead of the *how*.

Remaining behind raised desk placed between Halpern and Sevlak, Jade rose to her feet and said, "This appearance before the Fengrine Unity and Justice Commission is called to order. May the parties please rise."

Halpern and Sevlak got to their feet and with effort turned their glares away from each other and tried to give Jade a pleading look. The fifty-some other beings gathered in the chamber to spectate remained seated.

As procedure dictated, Jade began by summarizing what everyone here already knew. "We're gathered today to hear the charges brought by Master Halpern against Master Sevlak. Both parties have agreed to settle their matter in this Unity and Justice trial and will consent to its judgment."

That was the important part. Civil justice had its own way of dealing with the messy aftermath of Senex-Juvex Rising, where the old aristocracy had been bloodily toppled and a new, more democratic government put in place. These trials were only called when both parties agreed to forgo formal legal procedures and seek arbitration of the Jedi. When her cousin Allana Solo Djo had proposed them years ago, Jade hadn't been sure how well they'd work, but seventeen years later they were still going. It was a sign, she liked to think, of the trust it had built between these citizens and the Jedi Order.

"We will begin by hearing the complaint brought by Master Halpern," Jade said. "Please be seated."

Though she knew nothing about this specific case, Jade had arbitrated enough trials to know what to expect. Fengrine had long been an agricultural world, and for centuries it had provided food for House Vandron with foodstuffs thanks to the thankless toil of its laborers. Halpern explained that he'd been a low-level employee of House Vandron before the Rising. He'd been in charge of the harvesting and distribution of crops for a full quarter of the planet's northern hemisphere. He insisted he'd treated his employees well and argued, always in vain, for improved wages for them. Jade spotted that one immediately as a lie, but she kept listening. Halpern went on, saying that during the Rising, a mob of his former employees had stormed his compound, destroyed most of his property, beaten him badly, and placed him in prison. Worst of all, Halpern said, the mob had stolen his year-old daughter.

Jade could feel the audience's interest rise as Halpern struggled to keep in his tears. He said that after years and years of paying investigators he'd discovered that his daughter had been raised by one of the members of that mob, Master Sevlak. The child, now eighteen years of age, had moved off-world for education and was not present; according to Sevlak in his response, he'd not even informed his daughter of the trial, deciding it would upset her needlessly to hear Halpern's baseless accusations.

He was lying too. Even without the Force it was clear that Sevlak was terrified of losing a daughter he knew wasn't his by blood. A simple genetic test, the kind required by a civil suit, would have proven that part easily. It was probably why Sevlak had agreed for trial by Jedi; like so many of them, he was hoping for a lenient sentence.

Yet as Sevlak gave his rambling rebuttal Jade could tell there was more to it than that. Sevlak knew his child wasn't his by blood, but he believed her to be his in fact. More, he believed he *deserved* her. There was a deep anger behind his protestations; every time he dared look at Halpern, Jade could feel a rage bordering on murderous.

Once the opening statements had been given, Jade turned her attention back to the plaintiff. "Master Halpern, I have questions that require elaboration. First, can you please explain what relationship you had with Master Sevlak before the Rising?"

The old man looked pointedly at Jade. "He was my employee. I knew him in a strictly professional matter. I always treated him fairly."

She looked at the defendant. "Master Sevlak?"

"I disagree. Strongly."

"Please provide me with specifics."

That angry secret inside him was trying to get out. Jade reached out with the Force to encourage him. She tried to soothe his anxiety, tell him that once he spoke the truth he would be unburdened and free. Sevlak was still reluctant; she knew that whatever his secret was, the truth about his stealing the child would have to come out first.

Finally, his resolve broke. He stabbed a finger at Halpern and said, "All right, I did it! Do you understand? I stole his daughter. He *owed* me a child!"

As he got the last sentence out Halpern shot to his feet and tried to shout over it. "You see! He's guilty, he admitted it! He has no right to my daughter!"

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Jade tried to project calm to them all in the Force as she said, "Please, Master Halpern, wait your turn. Master Sevlak, please continue your statement.

With visible effort, Sevlak kept his eyes on the Jedi. "You heard what I said. Halpern owed me a child after he *killed* mine."

Halpern jerked to his feet but Jade shoved him back into his chair with the Force. "Go on, Master Sevlak."

"It was three years before the rising. The accident at the grain refining plant." Sevlak looked at the audience. "Some of you were there for it! You know what happened!"

"That was an accident!" Halpern shouted over the murmurs of assent.

"It happened because *you* skimped money for the safety checks, money that went into your own pocket!"

Jade called for order as people in the audience began to get to their feet and shout agreement or dissent. She used the Force to calm their anger as best she could and with invisible hands she kept Halpern and Sevlak both in their seats.

"Master Halpern," she said, "Do you have a rebuttal?"

The man glared angrily at his accuser but Jade could feel knowledge beneath his indignation; despite what he claimed, Halpern was responsible for the industrial accident that had killed Sevlak's child, and apparently some others. Halpern hadn't *meant* for it to happen; he was telling that to himself over and over to assuage his guilt.

Jade gave him a tiny nudge, so the thoughts in his head became words from his mouth. "It was an accident," he wheezed. "I never meant harm."

Above murmurs from the audience, Jade asked, "Master Halpern, are you saying you are responsible for the accident that

killed Master Sevlak's daughter?" It was important that these trials ended with the full truth in the open and recorded.

"I'm not...." He exhaled and bowed his head. "I didn't mean for it to happen. But it happened. Like he said."

"Because you cut back on security checks and used money for yourself."

Halpern nodded grimly, but Jade could feel acceptance mix with relief. She turned her attention to Sevlak; he needed to finish his own unburdening. "Master Sevlak, did you take Master Halpern's daughter as a conscious act of retribution?"

"Not retribution," Sevlak said firmly, and Jade felt he believed it with all his heart. "Justice for what was done. He stole my child so I took his. The difference is that the girl I raised grew up in a loving home with a happy life."

The truth seemed to be out. In a voice of weak protest Halpern said, "Whatever I did or didn't do, I did not deserve to have my daughter stolen from me."

Deserve, Jade had already learned, was one of those words that could mean just about anything. Yet she felt Halpern's honest pain, the horrible aching of a man who'd believed his daughter dead all these years, gone through grieving any parent would have, and then gone through a new different devastation of loss once he'd learned what had really become of her. In some ways it was even more cruel than the fate that had befallen Sevlak.

The Jedi had been placed in charge of these trials to mete out justice to the satisfaction of all parties using powers only they possessed. Jade called for silence from the audience and reached out with the Force to feel both minds: the plaintiff and accused, the defendant and accuser. Harm begat harm and damage produced more damage; it was the story of the Senex-Juvex Rising as written in countless lives. After so long judging trials, Jade knew that all too well. Sometimes she felt crushed by the weight of all the diverse grievances befalls in this galaxy shouldered on each other.

Yet in the end, she was still a judge, and it was her job to make a pronouncement.

She cleared her throat and said, "The Fengrine Justice and Unity Commission is ready to pronounce judgment. Master Sevlak, you are ordered by the court to inform your daughter of her genetic heritage. Master Halpern, you will be permitted one month with your daughter. After that she will be given one more month to make her own decision as to which of you, singular or plural, she wants in her life. She is of the legal age of reason as defined by the Senex Sector charter and will therefore make her own choice that both of you will abide by without protest or question.

"Case dismissed."

The pronouncement sent more murmurs through the courtroom, but Sevlak and Halpern simply bowed their heads, tired from the unburdening but accepting, at last, of the fate that had been given them. It was, Jade knew by now, the best they could hope for. As for her, she was glad to be done with it and happy to go home, where her family was waiting.

At the end of these trials she always felt drained. They were different from what they'd been. Over fifteen years had passed since the Rising and the immediate and bitter grievances had turned into simmering grudges, the kind that could easily be rekindled into new violence. That made them both easier and more difficult to handle, but at least now requests for Jedi arbitration came much less frequently.

Jade had arrived in Senex-Juvex on the later end, well after she'd completed the trials and become a full Jedi Knight. Where there had once been over a hundred knights and masters determining justice in the messy aftermath of the Rising, there were now less than two dozen. She'd been based on Fengrine for seven years now, and despite the difficulties she had no plans to leave. After what Ben Skywalker had sacrificed to bring peace to Senex-Juvex and defeat the Sith who'd started the bloody Rising, it was the least Jade could do to honor the memory of her father.

One thing she did like about living on Fengrine was that there was no lack of space. Her home itself was a simple thing, two small square storeys stacked atop each other, and it was set off from the nearest landspeeder path by four hundred square meters of flat

open field full of growing crop. On afternoons like this, when the summer sun was turning the sky gold and the field bronze, it was indeed a beautiful sight.

The sky and landscape were good, but the best part today was seeing her husband and sons outside the house. She'd known Jodram Tainer almost all of her thirty-three years and he'd never quite outgrown the long-limbed lankiness that had marked him as a teenager. Nat, meanwhile, was a stocky boy with sand-colored hair like his mother and like both parents displayed an early talent for the Force. His younger brother Kol was already sporting a mop of red hair like his grandfather. He sat with his butt in the dirt and his legs splayed in front of him, a three-year-old's messy imitation of his father's crouch.

Jade approached them quietly so as not to disturb Nat. He displayed remarkable patience for a seven-year-old as he sat crosslegged in the dirt, eyes closed, twitching only a little as he lifted another stone up from the ground with his mind and piled it atop the three he'd already gathered. It was more than Jade had been able to do at that age; the pain of her mother's death had caused her to withdraw from the Force for a long time and she was unspeakably glad that own son was growing up without the trauma of loss. As Nat placed the fourth rock in place the little tower wavered but did not fall. She could see the boy wince in concentration. She glanced at Jodram and he glanced at her, and they exchanged tight smiles. Kol watched it all with a child's silent wide-eyed wonder.

Wind blew across the open field, rustling the stalks. A flock of avians burst into the sky and finally the little stone tower toppled into the dirt.

Nat's eyes narrowed to look at his fallen work. His scowl looked comically out of place on his plump face. "I was so *close*," he pouted.

"You did great, don't worry about it," Jodram patted his son the shoulder.

"It was the birds. They distracted me."

"You'll learn to filter it out in time, don't worry," Jade said.

Nat stared down at his scattered pile, clearly despondent, then said, "I'm hungry. When's dinner?"

The attention of a seven-year-old, even a natural-born Jedi, never stayed on one thing for long. Jade said, "I could use something too, actually."

"All right," Jodram said. "Nat, take your brother in and sit him down. Then go get the table ready. I'll see what I can warm up."

"Okay," the older boy said. He unfolded his legs, got to his feet, brushed the dust off his backside, then bent low to pluck Kol by the hand. He held his brother up to his feet and the two of them began making their way around the house to the front door. The seven-year-old's confident strides shortened themselves so as not to unbalance the three-year-old's hobbles.

"Don't forget to take your shoes off when you get inside!" Jade called back. Nat gave no answer; she'd have to trust he'd do as asked.

Jodram, meanwhile, rose up from his crouch and asked, "How was the trial?"

"I've been through worse," Jade sighed, and it was true. A case of a stolen child at least held some prospect for a happy ending. Like all the Jedi working in Senex-Juvex she'd not only had to listen to terrible stories of corruption and murder, she'd had to *feel* the emotions of perpetrators and victims. Every time she came away from one of these trials, having been exposed to the words in sentients' nature, she found herself doubting whether the Jedi could really heal so many wounds. Coming home to Jodram and the boys always gave her the stirring of hope she needed.

"Want to talk about it?" Jodram asked.

"Not right now." She shook her head. Jodram was a Jedi too, and he'd sat in on as many of these trials as she had. He knew exactly what she was going through.

Jodram stepped beside her, put an arm over her shoulder and pulled her close. She rested her head against his side as they faced the broad open field, the clear sky. Her father had grown up in a little bit of everywhere, never calling a place home. She'd heard from her grandfather about the barren planet Tatooine, where he'd spent most of his youth staring out at the desert and its twin suns, longing for the empty landscape of his life to be filled.

Jade's childhood and youth were gone. Ossus had been her place then, but no more; not since her father's death. Fengrine, for all the troubles she endured here, had become a home. She looked out on its broad empty landscape and felt satisfied.

But it wasn't the landscape that made the life. It was her husband beside her, their sons in the house, hopefully with their shoes by the door. She knew that, as a Jedi, her duties would take her away from Fengrine at some point and she'd have to find some other place to call home, and she knew she could do it as long as she had her family at her side.

Nat called impatiently from the house, saying the table was set and he was still hungry. Jodram chuckled, let his arm fall off her shoulders, and trotted toward the house. Jade spared one last look at the golden sky, then followed him inside.

Sometimes, when she wanted to console herself, Allana Solo Djo thought on her uncle. After having the position foisted on him by Luke Skywalker, Jagged Fel had been Imperial Head of State for less than three years. After intentionally throwing the Empire's first democratic election he'd ending up acting as liaison between the Imperial, Alliance, and Chiss governments for the next forty years. She also thought on her grandmother, who'd been President of the New Republic for about a decade and had spent most of her life thereafter entangled with galactic statecraft.

It consoling but also sobering, because it meant that Allana still had a lot of work ahead of her.

It had been three years since she'd stood down as Galactic Alliance Chief of State, giving her a turn in office slightly longer than Leia Organa Solo's. Another woman had stepped up to fill her position as the Hapan exiles' representative in the Senate and one of her closest political allies had won the election to succeed her. For a brief time she'd actually thought she could retire to the main Academy on Ossus, teach with her mother on Dathomir, or perhaps find some other place to cultivate the Jedi talents she'd let languish in political office. She'd allowed herself to think she could, in a

galaxy still at peace, she could evade the traps Jagged and Leia had fallen into.

But then, just one week after taking office, her successor had called her in and offered her a newly-created position as office senatorial liaison with the Jedi Order. Kyrr Esch had known she wouldn't refuse it; beneath his mild scholar's exterior, the little Mrlssi was a canny political player. Allana didn't grudge him that. Deep down she'd known she'd fall into a similar position anyway, and now she'd been invested with official authority by the Alliance. It was a vital step in bringing the Jedi Order in closer alignment with the reigning galactic government.

It did, however, mean a lot more run-around than when she'd been Chief of State, already a job that required frequent travel. If Allana had a home any more it was her personal shuttle, a Hapan vehicle she'd used during her time as a senator as well. Despite everything else she'd been Allana preferred to think of herself as a Jedi above all, and Jedi required nothing in the end except the Force.

She tried to remember that part especially as she stepped down the halls of the palace, into the office that had once been hers. Kyrr Esch had put his own stamp on it; abstract but detailed two-dimensional Mrlssi artwork was framed on the walls along with replicas of historic documents from a dozen worlds, all of them affirming the virtues of democracy and the rights of sentients across cultures. As messaging went it was unsubtle but effective.

When the guards let her into the office Chief of State Esch was behind his desk, seating upright in a raised seat that could have fit a human child. He waved a feathered arm to the chair across from his desk and Allana took it.

"Welcome back to Coruscant," Esch chirped. "When did you get in?"

"Last night." She looked out the window. Morning light was glinting on speeder lanes thick with rush hour traffic. "My body's still on Ossus time, to tell you the truth."

"Tsi, that is understandable. I suppose congratulations are in order."

"For what?" Allana frowned.

"For the role the Jedi played at Nesporis III, of course."

"Ah, yes." Her mind was still tired and muddled.

"I understand a Jedi was killed in the operation. Condolences."

"Thank you, Chief. He wasn't the only one. The Imperials lost half the ships in the convoy and most of the raiders were wiped out."

"Yet they took prisoners," Esch said evenly.

They'd been through this all before. In her life Allana was always having to balance many roles: Jedi Knight, Hapan royalty, Alliance representative, and perhaps most important of all, descendant of Anakin Skywalker and member of that sprawling family. It was no wonder that she'd never had the time to start a family of her own when she was always trying to prioritize different parts of what she already was.

She knew what they'd learned from the raiders taken prisoner. She'd heard it from her mother, who'd gotten it from Jaina who'd learned from Jagged. She could tell Esch, but she knew it was the kind of information that should be relayed formally between Imperial and Alliance agencies. Esch knew it too, but the Mrlssi wasn't above casting a line and hoping he got lucky.

She gave him a version of the truth. "The interrogations were... inconclusive. The Imperial border is being attacked by a conglomerate of different species from the Unknown Regions. They're after plunder and don't care how much destruction they leave in their wake."

"This we know," said Esch, fishing still. "Has anything *else* been learned about their motives?"

Allana shook her head. "I'm sorry, sir. It's all a muddle right now. But no one expects the attacks to stop."

A sigh whistled between Esch's small fine teeth. "The Alliance is lucky none of our worlds have been attacked so far, but we can't count on luck forever. Imperial intelligence has been... reluctant to share what it knows."

"I'm not sure there is much *to* share, sir."

"Tsi, perhaps. Head of State Avaris is not as... communicative as her predecessor."

Allana refrained from comment. The latest Imperial election had been three years ago, and the winner had been the former moff from the Velcar Sector. Neela Avaris had run on a platform of greater Imperial engagement with the outside galaxy and cooperation with the Alliance, but once in office her policies seemed more calibrated to appeasing the isolationists on the Moff Council.

"Have we offered intelligence of our own?" Allana asked. "Sometimes the best way to start a trade is to initiate it yourself."

"You make a good point, but *we* do not have much to share either."

"I don't suppose there's been any talk of invoking the Anaxes Treaty?" Allana asked. Drawn up almost fifty years ago, the agreement had sworn a dozen of the galaxy's large and small powers into a mutual self-defense pact.

"They have not requested our assistance," Esch said. "After all this time, their pride is still strong. If they accepted our help in taking care of mere raiders—"

"I understand," Allana said. After her time as Chief of State she understood the value of putting on a strong front, especially when you were vulnerable. She didn't envy Avaris her situation.

"Tell me," Esch said, "Are the Jedi planning to move more knights into Imperial space?"

"If Avaris requests them. For now we've just been using the knights stationed at Bastion."

"Tsi, I thought so. Accepting help from Ossus or another academy world would crack their pride a little more."

Allana nodded. For decades, her aunt had struggled to find and recruit Force-users from Imperial space. Anti-Jedi prejudice remained strong, but opinion had finally started tipping in their favor since the Senex-Juvex rising, where the crew of the battered frigate *Voidwalker* had helped the Jedi stop the superweapon the Sith had commandeered to wreak havoc. Allana suspected the increase of applicants to Jaina's academy was due, more than

anything, to the decision by war hero Marasiah Valtor to resign her naval commission and become a Jedi.

In the process it had created a curious situation. Where the Jedi who attended the academies on Ossus, Illum, Zonama Sekot and Bestine were drawn from a variety of worlds under a variety of governments, everyone who'd trained at Bastion had come from Imperial space. As much as they were Jedi, they were also Imperials, with a strong loyalty to their society of birth. Allana understood that; she hadn't been on Hapes in almost thirty years but it was still a key part of her life. She just hoped those knights on Bastion never had to choose between the Jedi Order and the Empire.

"We can't make choices for the Imperial government," Allana said. "The Jedi have made it a point to work *with* governments, not against them."

"A lucky thing for us all, tsi?" Esch gestured to the replica scrolls on his walls. "Had I the powers of the Jedi, it would be so tempting throw away the mandates of democracy and impose my will on others."

"It's tempted many Jedi too," Allana said grimly. Esch knew her well, but she'd never told him that her father had been Darth Caedus. Very few beings knew it and she wanted to keep it that way. "That's why we've have made it a priority to serve, not to rule."

"An interesting statement from a Jedi in politics." There seemed to be a sly twinkle in his black eye.

"I can't say I wasn't... tempted," Allana allowed a sigh, and the hint of a smile. "But I never used the Force to sway people. Not once. I promise."

"I believe you, Allana. And I admire your will." Esch pivoted to look out the window at bright Galactic City, bustling with its billions of lives. "Still, if *I* had that power, tsi, I would be tempted..."

Allana understood; she'd been tempted too, but she'd never given in. She'd known that her integrity had depended on it, not just as a Jedi but as leader of a republic. Democracy was a practice in self-restraint; breaking those self-imposed chains was how tyrants were born, be they Sith Lords or petty dictators.

46 — LEGACY'S EDGE

It was a lesson her family had learned the hardest way possible. She hoped the leaders of the Empire remembered it too.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fountain Palace on Hapes rose high above the nearby city and jutted out over cliffs that plunged majestically into the ocean, and Demia Lohr, reigning Queen of the Consortium for the past twenty-nine years, tried to begin every morning with a walk along the private white-stone balconies that looked down on the cliffs. The sound of waves and smell of salt-spray always made her feel energetic and young, and as she neared her seventieth year that made them more valuable now than ever.

It was a good setting to receive her morning briefings, both scenic and hard to eavesdrop on. Right now her niece Lenor Chalk walked alongside her, sometimes checking her datapad but reciting most of her report from memory. Lenor was not a tall woman by Hapan standards but her regal bearing made her seem taller. Her smooth white skin, black hair and bronze-tinted eyes recalled what Demia had looked like half a lifetime ago.

"Ducha Tellor says she was able to quash the labor protests on Reboam by herself," Lenor was saying. "She'll continue to monitor the situation but she doesn't think she'll need to request our security forces."

"Good to hear," Demia said as she looked out at the ocean. "What about the situation in the Lorellian Reach?"

"We still haven't been able to track down the pirates. Ducha Reshul is requesting an additional three Nova cruisers to assist in the hunt."

"Ducha Reshul should have been able to find them a long time ago," she grunted. "Give her one cruiser. Task a few agents to begin looking into her activities quietly. See if she's started receiving payments from any questionable sources since the pirates began their raids."

"It will be done, Your Majesty."

Demia looked away from the water. Lenor was staring at her, expectant, wondering if her duties here were done. The queen asked, "What about my granddaughter? She should be finished with her business on Gallinore by now."

"The Palace hasn't received word."

"Then hail Serissa and tell her that her queen expects her presence soon."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Lenor gave a brief bow from the waist. "Anything else?"

Nothing for Lenor. Demia trusted her niece as much as she trusted anyone in the Palace, but the problem that had put her to brooding was not for Lenor to help with. Ironically, right now she needed help from the people she trusted least.

"You may go," Demia said.

Lenor bowed once more then hurried inside. Demia sighed and leaned onto the parapet. She watched the waves, the constantly shifting gleam of morning light. Court intrigues in the Hapes Cluster were as fast-paced as they were ruthless, but the ocean never changed. It made her trials feel small, which was sometimes disturbing and sometimes a comfort.

She tried to cheer herself. This was a position she had won through her own cunning and determination, one she'd taken from the Jedi cultists who'd domineered the Hapes Consortium for decades under Tenel Ka and Tenenial Djo. That she'd retained the position for almost thirty years was as much of an accomplishment as claiming it.

Sometimes she thought on her daughter Melor and her heart ached, even after sixteen years. She'd brought the girl up to be as strong-willed and clever as her mother, and it had been that loving weakness that had blinded her to Melor's growing ambition. Ordering her own daughter's execution was the hardest thing she'd ever done. Serissa was still young, but so far the girl seemed not to have strayed as badly as her mother.

At least, Demia hoped not. The prospect of destroying her own granddaughter made her wonder if all she'd done to gain the throne had been worth it.

When she decided she'd watched the waves long enough, Demia slipped away from the parapet and through the door Lenor had gone through. The chamber beyond was a vestibule with walls and floor-tiles all in gleaming white stone, and she made it halfway across to the opposite door when a chill ran down her spine. She froze in the center of the room, took a deep breath, and turned around, knowing what she'd see.

It took her by surprise anyway. Instead of one tall figure draped in black robes, face shadowed by heavy hood, there were two Sith standing side-by-side.

Not moving from her spot, Demia said, "Well, congratulations. You've surprised me. I was expecting you to wait until nightfall to skulk around my palace. Did you harm any of my guards?"

"They will never know we're here," said a deep, smooth voice she recognized as Darth Avanc's.

"Well, that's something." Demia folded her hands in front of her. "I take it you received my message and are here to help."

"We're here to listen," said Avanc. "And render assistance if we deem it necessary."

She fought a scowl. Having a Jedi cultist sitting on the throne of Hapes had been an insult to their entire civilization. Removing Tenel Ka and her daughter had been not only right, but *necessary*. Demia wasn't proud of the pact she'd struck with this other Force-cult, but over the past thirty years the Sith had repeatedly rendered services not even her most skilled agents could accomplish.

She gave her head a haughty tilt. A Queen of Hapes could look just as intimidating as a Sith when she wanted "Darth Avanc, are you going to introduce your friend, or do I have to guess?"

"Of course." Avanc raised both hands to pull the hood off his face. Demia knew it well by now; since the death of Darth Xoran, he'd been her primarily interlocutor with the Sith. Hapans had high standards for male attractiveness and Avanc would have won his share of admirers in the Court were it not for the violet tint to his skin that marked alien blood. For the refined structure of his face, black tattoos running in stripes off his chin and cheekbones hinted at a savage nature.

The hood came off the other Sith's face and Demia was surprised again. It was another male, almost human but younger than Avanc. He had no tattoos on his face but his skin was a deep blue tone, his hair a shimmering blue-black. His eyes lacked iris or pupil and glowed red-gold. Demia knew what Chiss looked like, though she'd never expected to see one with her own eyes. Their people were even more secretive and xenophobic than the Hapans.

"This is Darth Terrid," Avanc said. "I've decided he'll help you with your problem."

The Chiss said nothing but kept his glowing eyes fixed squarely on Demia. Unflinching she said, "Very good. Tell me, what do you know of my problem?"

"We know that someone has been trying to kill you," Terrid said. "You did not specify how, but we know there have been no violent attempts on your life."

The Sith always seemed to know what was going on in the Fountain Palace, even though they supposedly had no permanent presence on the planet. "You've heard correct. Of course, there's an infinity of ways to kill a person."

"What ways have they tried to kill *you*?" asked Avanc.

"Poison. Three different times now using three different concoctions. The first was a Triphenyl potion in my food. The second used Dreenan spider-fish blood in my wine. The last was tasteless Vergillian devil-grass inserted in a salad."

"Very creative," Avanc observed.

"Yes, and I had a different kitchen staff preparing every meal," Demia said sourly.

"You've interrogated them fully?" asked Terrid.

"Select staff have been questioned quietly. I'm not in the habit of advertising attempts on my life."

"Correct me if I am wrong," the Chiss said, "But wasn't a member of your personal serving staff recently hospitalized?"

Again, they were frighteningly well-informed. "After we caught the first attempt I insisted he taste-test my future meals. The poison snooper missed the spider-fish blood. He didn't. That was when I realized they were using very, as you said, *creative* methods."

"When was the most recent attempt?" asked Terrid.

"Three days ago. There's been nothing since then, but I've been preparing meals myself."

"What a trial this must be for you," Avanc said with faint mocking.

She sneered. "Persistent attempts on your life *do* wear you down. But you Sith wouldn't know that, would you?"

"Of course not," Avanc said firmly. "We are *One* Sith."

So he said, over and over. The Sith cultists from the stories Demia had read were always at each other's throats, apprentice murdering master over and over. Those stories had struck a little close to home, and she still didn't believe the Sith sheltered in Hapan space were the happy family Avanc liked to claim.

But there was no point in arguing that now. She said, "I'm requesting assistance. Will you give it?"

"What do you expect us to do, specifically?"

"Find who is behind the poisonings. Apprehend them. Deliver them intact to me."

It was how they usually did things. Demia planned to kill the plotters anyway, but she wanted to hear an admission of guilt from their own mouths. If the Sith handed her a body it would mean nothing.

Back when this partnership had started she'd known she could never trust these cultists any more than she'd trusted the Jedi. In the beginning she'd naively thought she could use her personal security

team to clear them out once the Jedi were gone. Then she'd seen Darth Xoran in action; she'd stood by and watched as the Falleen woman personally outfought a Jedi Knight in a lightsaber duel, then delivered her an agonizing death with a blaze of blue lightning. After that, she'd realized the Sith were going to be around for a long time, and that she'd have to work with them and against them in equal measure.

Her security service was still useful. She kept track of their movements and knew most of them were holed up on the isolated world called Shedu Maad. That the planet had once housed a secret Jedi base was surely deliberate irony on the Sith's part. She knew other things too, including the names and often faces of their most prominent leaders, of which Avanc was one. She kept that information stored on a dozen individual communications relays inside the Consortium, all heavily encrypted and all programmed to broadcast to the Jedi academy on Ossus on the official proclamation of her death. The Sith knew this; they'd disabled four of those communication stations over the years but clearly knew there were more out there. It was the best insurance policy on her life Demia had come up with, and it had worked for thirty years.

"Is there anything else you wish us to do?" asked Darth Terrid. His presence unsettled Demia; for all her information-gathering she'd never heard the Sith had a Chiss with them.

"For now that will be enough," she said. "For the future... we shall see."

"Expect Darth Terrid to contact you next," Avanc said. "It shouldn't take long to find your conspirators."

"Remember, I want them alive."

"And you'll have them. Goodbye for now, Your Majesty," Avanc said. He and Terrid threw their hoods over their faces and backed toward the door out to the balcony. They stepped through; the door closed behind them. Demia fought the urge to follow them or to rush to a security station and see where they'd go from her private walkways. It would be undignified and more, pointless. The Sith could move around her palace with impunity and she couldn't stop

them. That was the way it had always been. She wasn't happy about it, but she could accept that there were more important problems.

Picking the right battles to fight was the most important part of leadership. She'd learned that one long ago.

The Fountain Palace was a cluster of domes and towers jutting out against the sea. Just as the inside was a maze of carefully laid security scanners, cameras, and traps, so was the outside. Getting in and out was always a challenge, but as Darth Avanc said, challenge was needed to keep a Sith sharp. Nonetheless, Darth Terrid was relieved when they ascended to the top of the highest spire above the Palace's broad domes roofs. The wind came on strong, snapping their cloaks violently around them, but at least there were no sensors or cameras to jam or evade. Further, the view of palace on ocean both was unmatched.

Darth Avanc settled into a cross-legged posture and Terrid did the same. The wind came in from of the continent, pounding their backs as they faced the crashing ocean. Up this high the wind howled louder than the waves, but Terrid heard Avanc clearly as he said, "We will do as she asks this time. Find the one who is trying to kill her and deliver them. Stay in the Palace until it is done."

Terrid had expected that, but he wasn't looking forward to it. "Do you have any idea who is trying to kill her this time?"

"With so many options, I can't pick one." Avanc snorted. "Just do what you have to short of killing, Darth Terrid."

That wasn't helpful, but the Chiss nodded anyway. Wiping memories was a skill he'd mastered a long time ago.

"Will you go back to Shedua Maad?" he asked.

"For now."

"Will you take the ship?"

"I will."

So Terrid had to stay on Hapes until he completed his mission; either that, or he'd have to steal a ship to escape. He was still being tested, after all this time. The One Sith preached unity among Dark Siders but they trusted each other as little as the Hapans.

But no, that wasn't true. Those born One Sith trusted each other implicitly. Darth Avanc was one of those, as indicated by the striped tattoo-marks on his face. More, he was a near-human Keshiri, born from survivors of the so-called Lost Tribe of the Sith. Avanc's ancestors had been indoctrinated into Sith ways thousands of years in the past. A mere fifty years ago, his parents had emerged from their remote world and tried to destroy the Jedi Order. They'd failed miserably and the Lost Tribe had scattered. In time many of them had found their way to the One Sith, but only a relative handful had been deemed worthy. Avanc's parents had been among them, and he'd been trained in Sith arts since he was a tiny child, as the Jedi used to do with their younglings in the days of the Old Republic.

Avanc knew nothing else except belonging. Terrid had never known it at all. He'd spent only half his life among the One Sith and even if he spent the rest of it with them he'd always be a little apart. Before that, as a curious Force-sensitive among the Chiss he'd rarely known belonging, nor had he felt it during his brief years as a Chiss among Jedi.

But there had been moments: brief, fleeting, sundered in an instant. He still thought about them sometimes: Arlen Fel, Jade Skywalker, Jodram Tainer. They usually seemed like another man's memories, or like old holo-dramas he'd watched years ago and mostly forgotten. But sometimes, only rarely, something surged within him and he could remember what it was like to be among beings who trusted him implicitly and whom he could trust in turn.

But that was a long, long time ago. He'd never get Ran'wharn'csapla's life back even if he wanted it, which he did not. The Sith showed the way to greater power, greater strength, than the Jedi allowed themselves. For all their flaws they offered that.

Knowing that made his current task all the more frustrating. He asked Darth Avanc, "What's the latest news from Imperial space?"

"Why are you curious?" He thought he heard a little amusement in the Keshiri's voice.

"Nothing to do with old friends. I simply want to know."

"The raids continue. Darth Kroan says the Imperials have captured some of them but are no closer to finding out where the attacks are coming from."

Kroan was another One Sith who'd been indoctrinated as an adolescent, but he was older and more trusted by the born-Sith. Terrid frankly envied him the freedom to range out in the wider galaxy, working toward Lord Krayt's design. As a child on Csilla, Ran'wharn'csapla had dreamed of seeing the crowds and spires of Coruscant's planet-spanning city. So many years later, Darth Terrid had still never been there.

"The Jedi seem to have grown popular among Imperial citizens," Terrid observed.

"Only among some. Distrust of their kind runs deep."

"Are there plans to use it?"

"Of course. But we have to move carefully. After Senex-Juvex the Jedi are alert for any trap. We can't go around leading revolutions this time. We have to get the vermin to do it for us."

"Manipulating the vermin should not be hard."

"Don't underestimate them. We still haven't found all the data packages the queen would send to the Jedi after her death."

"Ah. So *that's* why we're saving her miserable life."

"That and we've found no better replacement."

"A Sith queen would be quite a prize. A shame Force-sensitivity is so hard to find in these worlds."

"They purged themselves of Jedi centuries ago."

"Wise of them, but bad for us."

"Indeed." Avanc sighed. "I know you think this is a petty job, Darth Terrid."

He didn't bother to deny it. "I want to build Lord Krayt's design. We all do. Sneaking through palaces, doing the dirty work for scheming vermin, it's *beneath* us."

"Yet it's work that must be done. If the Jedi *do* learn of our presence here, they'll spare no effort to destroy us."

"They have to suspect."

"Yes, but they don't have the resources to secretly comb every planet in the Hapes Cluster looking for us. If the queen dies they'll

be spared the searching and we'll have to uproot ourselves again. This is as good an arrangement as we'll get with the vermin, especially clever ones like the queen. It's safer to preserve it."

Safe, Terrid thought. A very un-Sith-like word, but he took Avanc's point. Still, he wished he had other work to do.

Avanc rose to both feet. Wind whipped his robe violently around him. "Remain here for a while, Darth Terrid," the Keshiri said. "Once I'm gone, go back into the palace and begin the hunt. When you find the conspirators, let us know first, then the queen."

"Yes, Lord Avanc."

The other Sith gave the tiniest nod, then stopped off the tower and plunged. Terrid stared at the blue sky where he'd been a second before, then scooted to the edge of the tower and looked down. No living beings in sight, but then, the Keshiri had always been good at concealment. More than any other Sith, Darth Avanc had been responsible for training Terrid in the ways of their order. For a long time he'd resisted, but after realizing the power within he'd come to embrace the darker aspects of the Force.

He was still loyal to the One Sith, but their faults had been clear from the start. They'd been in hiding for decades and it had made them cautious. For a group that claimed it wanted to break the galaxy apart and remake it anew, the One Sith had spent a long time skulking in shadows. Lord Krayt remained in his isolation chamber, suspended in his dreams while other Sith did his bidding. Patience was to be admired, but timidity was not, and it seemed to Terrid that the One Sith had stood by and done too little as the Jedi worked itself into the good graces of Alliance and Empire both, even putting one of their own in power on Coruscant for over a decade. Again and again, the One Sith had balked from destroying her. Terrid had never agreed with it, but as an apprentice Sith he'd deferred again and again to Darth Avanc, Maleth, Wyyrlok, and the other senior Lords.

That would change. All things changed. A young boy had abandoned the only people he'd known to become a Jedi knight, only to become faced with the intransigent limitations and seemingly-inevitable failures the light side of the Force offered.

Then, captured by the Sith, he'd resisted their indoctrination for years until very gradually coming to realize that their way offered the path to strength the likes of which neither Jedi nor Chiss could offer, the kind of strength he'd wanted all his life. It was a string of circumstance that should have seemed absurd, but it was the story of his life.

With that in mind, Darth Terrid had no doubt all things were possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Jedi training center on Bastion was located on the outskirts of the administrative city of Ravelin. A steep-walled pyramid, it recalled the architecture of ancient academy on Ossus, though its smooth durasteel slopes and hard angles bespoke modern sensibilities and a clear Imperial heritage one would not have expected to see paired with the Jedi Order. At least, they wouldn't have when Jagged Fel was young.

The academy had been built over forty years ago and Jag's long life had accumulated layers of memories in this place. He remembered watching Jaina practice unarmed sparring with new recruits on the square mats in the lower level. On the convocation hall on the highest level he'd seen Jedi Grand Masters- first Luke Skywalker, then his son Ben- give addresses to young Imperials who'd looked on with reverence. He'd seen his son Arlen meditating in the greenhouse garden built in the south-facing side and later found his then-new daughter-in-law Marasiah doing the same.

The day after they returned from Chiss space, he and Davek went to the academy and ended up in that lower level practice room. Jaina was there, but his wife was long passed the years when she could wrestle with ex-stormtroopers. She had never been a tall

woman, and age had made her smaller, but even past her eightieth year she sat straight and attentive as she watched her grandchildren spar with lightsabers. She still wore her hair long and straight down her back; even after all this time a few streaks of dark brown ran through the gray. Jag sat beside her and watched patiently as Marin and Vitor clashed sabers. Young Roan was on the floor in front of his grandparents, cross-legged, leaning forward eagerly to watch the match. He was too young to build a saber of his own, but Jagged knew the boy was eager to get to it. For all nine years he'd looked on his older brother with admiration and envy.

The parents were on their feet, hovering at the edge of the mat, watching with silent intent as the teenagers traded trusts and parries. Jag could tell Davek was nervous even without the Force. Vitor and Marin had constructed lightsabers under their grandmother's guidance just a month ago and their motions were all slow, cautious and telegraphed, but those were still real weapons, likely to cleave off a limb. His wife seemed calmer; Marasiah's eyes were narrowed as she traced her son's footwork. Arlen stood on the opposite of the mat with all attention on his daughter, and like Marasiah he seemed more concerned with form than like-threatening injury.

The teenagers had started the duel slow and hesitant, but things were gradually picking up. Vitor was putting more force into his swing, while Marin dared a few jabbing thrusts that got a little too close to her cousin's chest for Jag's liking. He wasn't surprised it was going this way. Having been born so close together, Marin and Vitor had always been competitive.

After a few more minutes they were both taking broad swings. Sabers crashed and crackled against each other. Jag glanced anxiously at Jaina, who watched the whole thing impassively. After all these years there were still times when he didn't know what she was thinking.

Finally there came the moment to stop: Vitor swung hard and hard horizontal blow that Marin ducked away from and caught with the inside of her yellow blade. Vitor's green one sparked against it as he lunged forward, jabbing the tip of his saber at her shoulder.

Marin yelped, jumped back, and let her weapon drop. Vitor stumbled forward, blade swinging down to sizzle through the skin of the mat. Davek had already rushed onto the practice square when Jaina clapped both hands.

"All right, that's enough for today!"

Marin and Vitor both shut off their weapons and snapped quick bows in their grandparents' direction. Davek froze awkwardly behind Vitor then stepped away. When the teenagers trotted off the mat Jagged could see how slick with sweat they were.

As they both gulped down water from their canteens, Marasiah said, "That was a good start, both of you, but you need to get the basics down before you start sparring for *real*."

"What's the point of practicing if we don't treat it like a real fight?" asked Vitor after a big gulp.

"The point is to train your body," said Arlen. "You need to get used to how it *feels* to swing a saber with no weighted blade. You need to get things like posture and footwork down to instinct so you can think about your opponent when you're fighting. Once you've got that down perfectly, *then* you can spar for real. Otherwise it's like trying to throw up a building on a pile of dirt. You need a solid foundation first, one you're sure won't come down on top of you."

Vitor couldn't wipe that impatient, youthful frown off his face, but Marin managed a reluctant nod. "Okay. I see that you mean. We just got... carried away."

"Being a Jedi is all about self-control," Marasiah added. "*That* is the foundation of everything."

"Okay, okay, we get it," Vitor breathed. He stretched out both long limbs, rolled his neck, then looked down at his younger brother. "Well, what do you think? Who would've won?"

Roan gave his head a thoughtful tilt that looked out-of-place on a boy so young. "You had better footwork, but Marin had more self-control."

Arlen laughed. "See? Roan knows just what to look for. You should listen to him more often."

"All right, I'll keep it in mind," Vitor said, a little resigned.

Marin asked, "Can we go shower now? I stink."

"In that case, shower away," Jaina waved a hand. "When you're done come to garden. We'll meet you there."

The two teenagers hurried away. Roan, suddenly alone among so many adults, rose to his feet and looked listlessly around. Jag patted the place on the bench beside him. "Get up here, young man. I've got an open spot for you."

The boy nodded and pulled himself onto the bench. Jagged draped an arm around his shoulder and said, "It's good you're paying attention. With Vitor and Marin, you can see what to do and what not to do when you get a little older."

"You're very lucky," Marasiah said. "When I started training, I was older than everyone else and had no examples to look up to. I had to unlearn a lot of what I thought I knew."

"Oh, you weren't the worst student I've ever had," Arlen said with a grin.

Marasiah rolled her eyes. "How good to hear."

"I'll watch them both," Roan said. "I promise."

Jag felt a familiar bit of envy for Roan, not just because the boy was growing up in a state of peace, but because his path seemed clearly laid out. It had taken Davek decades to move past the disappointment of having no connection with the Force and become his own man. Jag's own life had led him through one unpredictable turn after the next, from the Yuuzhan Vong War to being marooned for two years on savage Tenupe, followed by a state of exile, then leadership of the Empire and finally a reunion with his surviving family. Jaina Solo had been the only constant to guide him through all of that; without her he'd have been truly lost a long time ago. For his grandchildren, there was none of that in sight.

But in knowing one's destiny there was also a burden. Jaina had been raised the grandchild of Darth Vader; her brother had broken under that weight. Arlen and Davek both had struggled to accept the responsibility being of being born to important parents. Vitor, Marin, and Roan would have to struggle too, and as much as Jag wanted to help them overcome any obstacle, he knew they'd have to find individual paths to adulthood.

62 — LEGACY'S EDGE

But they had this moment, at least. It wasn't often when all three generations, the complete family, was able to gather together. He'd told his sister that with limited years ahead of him his thoughts had become dominated by the legacy he'd leave behind. That was still true, but limited time also meant there were moments like these he had to savor: simple moments of simple pleasures with the people most important to him.

To break his thoughts Roan said, "I can't wait to make my own lightsaber."

That brought anxious chuckles from his parents. Davek said, "That's a little bit away. Just be patient."

"Listen to your father." Jagged messed the boy's black hair. "Take advice from someone who knows. You don't want to grow up too fast."

But Roan would, Jagged knew. They always did.

After everything was washed and dried and gathered in the greenhouse garden, the Fel family departed as one for the family's condominium located in a high-rise on the outskirts of Ravelin. It was the one same that Davek and Arlen had grown up in, and every time she visited Marasiah couldn't help but compare it to the one she'd been raised in.

Kolfax Minor was a long way from Bastion in more ways than one. One that sparsely populated planet the Valtor family had had room to build a bigger home than the two storeys of a residential tower the Fels occupied. The Valtor house, sitting far from its neighbors on acres of farmland, had been well-appointed by local standards, carrying with it a refinery that recalled the old Empire more than the cosmopolitan trappings of modern Ravelin.

It had always been *her* place, just as this was Davek's. After a large meal Arlen retired to his old bedroom, the children to a set of guest rooms. Marasiah got to Davek's old room first, and while he was talking with his parents in the living room she opened the window, breathed the warm summer air, and looked out on the towers of central Ravelin glowing in the night.

When Davek stepped into the room she didn't turn toward him. Instead she kept looking out at the skyline and said, "I'm still not used to this view."

"After all this time?" Davek sidled next to her, shoulder against shoulder as they crouched before the windowsil.

"It's just a long way from home."

"I thought Bastion *was* your home now."

"As much as a Jedi can have a home." Sometimes, just sometimes, when she said it aloud, it felt strange to consider herself a Jedi. That was the Kolfax Minor inside of her, the planet where they'd referred to Jedi as 'cultists' instead of 'knights.' That had changed now, mostly thanks to her. It felt strange going back there, the local hero returned. The escapades of the *Voidwalker* crew had grown to legend in the past decade and a half and none of the legends were bigger than hers and Davek's. Her joining the Jedi Order had done much to rehabilitate it in the eyes of the average Imperial citizen, most visibly in her family. After several years of gently pressing her brother Norram, he'd finally agreed to send his son Mohrgan to the academy on Bastion. The boy was two years younger than Roan but already showing talent.

"It must be good," she said, "Having a place to come back to after all this time."

"It is. It's always been here for me, this view. No matter what else has gone on." Davek breathed out. He'd just turned forty and for forty years this room had been here for him; a constant reminder of where he'd come from. The scar and white streak rising from his forehead added a look of distinction to Davek but otherwise he still looked younger than he was. He'd confided to her once or twice that he still *felt* young, despite all he'd accomplished personally and professionally. She'd known what he'd meant. All his accomplishments still seemed small compared to his parents' and he felt he was in their shadow.

Late-summer breeze drifted through the window, soft on their faces. She asked, "Are Vitor and Roan both in their room?"

He nodded. "Marin too. I bet they'll sleep tonight."

It was good to have everyone together. She knew it wouldn't last and decided to bring up the subject they've been avoiding all night. "When do you think you'll need us next?"

By *us* she meant, of course, the Jedi. "I don't know yet. We've just gotten the intel link with the Chiss set up. Hopefully it will let us predict their movements better. From there..." He shrugged. "It depends what our enemies do."

"Darakon gave you full control over our deployment."

"I know, and when I think Jedi can help, I'll ask for you."

She didn't need the Force to sense his reticence. "Don't worry about me, or Arlen. We can take care of ourselves."

"That's what my brother told me, right after they discharged him from the hospital after nearly getting stabbed to death."

"It's what we do, Davek. We're soldiers too." She knew most Jedi insisted they were more than that, which was true, but Marasiah had been a soldier for the Empire before she became a Jedi and deep down she still thought of herself as both, two things balanced in equal measure.

She also knew it would never be easy for Davek to send people he cared about into battle. She'd been right alongside him on *Voidwalker* as he learned how to command, how to make the hard choices and necessary sacrifices. As an admiral he'd reached a certain professional detachment, but all of that came to nothing where his family was concerned. It made things difficult for him, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Just wait on Bastion for now," he said eventually. "Once I get out to Ord Thoden I'll evaluate the fleet. Our supplies and conditions. See how the intelligence stream works out. Then I'll let you know."

She nodded and knew there was nothing more to say. Davek would be leaving soon; when the raiders started attacking again there was no way to know what would happen. They were all on the edge of uncertainty. She didn't know what would come next but she knew how she'd respond: like she always had. She'd protect her family and she'd protect the Empire. She was a Jedi and a soldier both. After all this time she knew she'd never be anything different.

* * *

The small pleasures of family time were important, but so was the legacy, and preserving the reformed Empire he'd helped make prevented Jagged Fel from ever disentangling himself from politics no matter how old he got. That was why, the day after the family gathering at the Jedi academy, he stepped into the office of Imperial Head of State to speak with Neela Avaris.

Jag had spent a lot of time in a lot of important people's offices and each of them said something about both the position and the occupant. This one was definitely Imperial: smooth metal walls, a broad floor and low ceiling, transparisteel windows subtly tinted to remove warmth from the morning sunlight. Rather than the endless Coruscant cityscape that Alliance offices looked out on, this one provided a view of the sprawling Pellaeon Gardens, the artfully tamed collection of flora from over a hundred Imperial worlds that covered a square kilometer in the center of Ravelin's government district. It seemed fittingly Imperial that there were grey towers rising on all sides, walling in the green space.

Avaris herself looked suitably Imperial too. Though she'd never been a part of the military she'd been a Moff, and as Chief of State she'd continued to dress in the olive-green martial uniforms befitting that office rather than the civilian suits that Jagged had tried to sport during his term in office. She was an older woman, about fifteen years younger than Jag, with streaks of black and white almost equally mixed in her hair, and sullen bags under her eyes that made her look perpetually sleepy even when well-rested.

"Good morning, Master Fel." Her tone, at least, was pleasant. "It's good to see you. I trust your whole family's together and well?"

It was the politician's subtle way of letting him know he was being kept tabs on. He lowered himself into the chair on the other side of her desk and said, "They're well, thank you. Arlen's just about healed from the fight at Nesporis III."

"That's good to hear."

"And your son?"

"He's doing well too. He and his wife are expecting their first child."

"Ah, now you'll know what it's like to be a grandparent," Jag smiled. "Congratulations. If you ever want advice, feel free to ask."

"I'll keep that in mind." The creases on her face straightened and her gracious smile faded. They both knew this was about more than just exchanging pleasantries.

"I want to thank you again for setting up the line with the Chiss. Fleet Intel has started reviewing the information they've been giving us. He says it's already given us key information on which routes the raiders are taking around Chiss space and where they're marshaling near our border."

"I'm glad. If we can block these attacks they should get tried and go pick on someone else."

"We're looking into more than that." Avaris folded her hands atop her desk. "I've authorized the supreme commander to prepare defensive attacks across the border. *That* should teach them to pick on someone else."

Jag let that roll around in his head. The space beyond the border was claimed by no government; they'd be invading no one's sovereign territory. Avaris was right: one offensive thrust would give the raiders more pause than a few more parries. None of that was what gave him pause.

"Will the responsibility for the attack lay with the Fourth Fleet?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm sure your son's up for it."

"I'm sure he is," Jag said, and he *was* sure, but it still worried him. Back during the Senex-Juvex crisis he'd been certain for over a month that Davek was dead, and it had felt like the bubble of security he'd risen over his family had been suddenly popped. Then Davek had returned, miraculously survived, but the bubble had never quite come back. Nothing had felt as secure again. Perhaps it was an inevitability of getting old.

"Will you be drawing ships from other fleets to buffer the Fourth?" Jag asked.

"Darakon is planning that now, but we'll still keep Bastion, Entralla, and Yaga Minor well-defended."

"I had no doubt." The moffs would throw a fit if they thought their capital worlds were even slightly at risk.

She raised a gray-black eyebrow. "We have enough ships to go around, Master Fel. We *are* the Empire. We can't be destabilized by a pack of alien rabble."

"I agree that we *shouldn't*. It doesn't mean people still aren't scared."

"We can assure our people *and* smash the raiders at once. We've also contacted Kuat. For a little extra payment they'll speed up construction on *Invincible*. They say it should be finished in five weeks. If the raiders are still a problem then, they won't be after."

Jag's first thought was that payments to Kuat Drive Yards were never little, but he kept it to himself. Avaris already knew his opinion: the *Invincible* project was a waste of money and resources, not to mention a bad public relations exercise. When running for office Avaris had pledged to limit military spending, but like almost every Head of State before her she'd bowed to the navy and nominally-civilian Moff Council, approving the construction of the Empire's first new super star destroyer in over fifty years. The behemoth would be a marvel of death-dealing technology, sure to rouse patriotism from many Imperial citizens, but the rest of the galaxy was going to see it as the rattling of a very expensive saber, the kind Palpatine would have loved. Avaris knew that, but she'd gone ahead with the project anyway.

Jag gave a small sigh. "Well. It's good to know we're prepared. Hopefully things will be settled before then."

"Hopefully."

"Of course, there's also the possibility that this crisis could get *worse* in two months. We still don't know what's drawing these raiders together, what their goals are, and what their resource base is."

"There's too many unknowns for anyone's liking," she said. "I suppose you're going to give me advice now."

"That's why you called me here, isn't it?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Go ahead, Mister Fel."

"If you want more ships to defend our space there's a galaxy-full. If you invoke the Anaxes Treaty the Alliance won't hesitate to send a full fleet to help us. This isn't like Senex-Juvex. Politically it would be a very easy choice."

"Senex-Juvex was supposed to be easy, politically and military. More than half a *million* Imperial soldiers died. We just agreed the situation today is full of unknowns. That means nothing is ever easy."

"I *know* the Alliance would help us."

"You also know the moffs wouldn't approve."

"Moffs can be convinced. They're elected officials, just like you, which means they answer to public will."

She shook her head. "Believe it or not, Mister Fel, I *have* seriously considered asking for outside help. But I know how the Council would vote. There's no point in asking."

"Veers doesn't cast every vote himself."

"No, but he has allies."

"Not all of them. Moff Moran--"

"Master Fel, *please*," she raised both hands. "I know how the moffs would vote and right now it would be against invoking the Anaxes Treaty. Maybe someday that will change, but not now."

Jagged was disappointed, but not surprised. He'd expected the meeting to go this way. Now that he had confirmation, he could go ahead with what he'd been planning to do anyway.

"I understand the realities of your position," he said. "I just hope this preemptive strike we're planning works like we hope it will."

"I trust your son, Mister Fel."

"So do I," Jag said, but left it at that. There was little else he *did* trust at the moment. One other exception was his ability to enact change, if he tried hard enough and worked the right political levers. If Avaris wouldn't budge on the Anaxes Treaty the Moff Council would have to. They were a stubborn group as always, but being chosen by popular election had made them less murderously intransigent than when Jag had been Head of State. In his long life he'd even made allies among them, allies he could work with to achieve his goal.

It was, he thought, a rare saving grace from a life in politics.

While the raiders sweeping in from the Unknown Regions had filled the Empire's citizens with dread, only a tiny percentage had encountered physical danger themselves. The populated and influential worlds like Bastion and Muunilist sat on the opposite side of Imperial space from the lightly-populated planets that sat close to the Unknown Regions. Development since the days of the Old Republic had mostly left those border worlds by the wayside. Ord Thoden was no exception. In the aftermath of the Emperor's death nearly a century ago, the planet had been viciously strip-mined for resources used in a struggling Empire's war machine. All these decades later the planet was noteworthy for little except the miles-wide pits that scarred its cold rugged surface and the dry-docks that had been erected in orbit.

The so-called twin pillars of the Empire were the great shipyards and military bases at Yaga Minor and Bilbringi, and Ord Thoden was nothing compared to those, but it was the most heavily-armed outpost near the Unknown Regions and almost twenty star destroyers from the Fourth Fleet had been pulled back here to regroup and refurbish.

As the admiral in charge of the defense of the borderlands, Davek Fel was swamped with work the moment he returned to Ord Thoden. He was forced to reckon with a list of work requests from every ship captain, supply orders from the dry-dock section chiefs, and intelligence reports from a dozen Imperial sources and, most importantly, the stream the Chiss had set up.

As his aunt Wynssa had warned, the Chiss weren't going to share everything they had with the Imperials, but their curated selection of reports were enough for Davek to start piecing together the enemy's movements. One defeat clearly hadn't cowed the raiders; they were bringing more ships than ever before close to the Imperial border, and that they hadn't struck yet meant they were shoring up their forces for something big. The raiders hadn't actually attacked a planet yet, but he had to be prepared for the worst.

It was for that reason that he arranged to meet Captain Por Dun. His temporary office aboard Ord Thoden's orbital biggest station may have been small but it had a view that looked out on four different star destroyers and a half-dozen frigates and corvettes all nestled in their docks, undergoing final checks and repairs in preparation for whatever push the enemy had planned. He was admiring *Resilience* when Por Dun showed up, and the first thing he said as she stepped through the door was, "You have a fine ship, Captain."

"A fine crew, sir," she nodded. They'd known each other for almost twenty years but she always met him stiff and formal.

He waved her at ease and sat down on the edge of his desk. "I've seen the latest reports. It looks like *Resilience* will be good to ship out by tomorrow morning."

"Do you have an assignment for us, sir?" Her masked Kel Dor face was impossible to read but he knew from her voice that she was a little wary.

Davek tapped the controls to his desk and a holographic map sprung up beside him. "When you correlate the intel from our people and the Chiss, we're looking at three main clusters of raiders that seemed to be forming. One outside the Presfbelt Sector, another by the Perrinn, and a last by the Dynali. The first cluster seems to be the biggest."

"It makes sense, sir." The Presfbelt Sector contained multiple heavily-defended worlds, including Yaga Minor and Borosk. "Do you think they'll actually attack? Or are they just there to contain a response?"

"That's one of those questions I'd really like an answer to," he sighed. "We still have no good tack on their raiders' motives. From the interrogations we've done, it sounds like there's some powerful leader or leaders- a king and queen, apparently- that are pushing all these different races into Imperial Space together."

"That sounds..." Por Dun trailed off and tilted her head. "Very strange, sir."

Davek chuckled dryly. "Yes it does, but that's the reality. Now, to get to the point, as of tomorrow *Resilience* is being reassigned to the

Valc system along with *Ascension* and *Conviction* and attendant support craft. Since you're the most senior captain I'm putting you in command of that task force."

"I'm honored, sir," she nodded. Valc VII in the Perrinn Sector was one of the few well-populated worlds near the border. "Is the rest of the fleet assuming a defensive posture too?"

That was her formal and polite way of asking why they weren't taking the fight to the enemy. Davek smiled a little and tapped the point outside the Perrinn Sector where a cluster of enemy ships were gathering. "I've just received approval from Admiral Darakon for an expedition past the border, to secure the border. I'm putting the plans together now, but I'll be taking at least ten destroyers. Naturally we don't want to spread ourselves too thin."

"Three destroyers should be enough to protect Valc VII," Por Dun said. "Are we supplementing existing units?"

"Not quite. The only ship over Valc VII right now is *Nighwatch*, which I'm pulling over to the expeditionary fleet."

"I see, sir." Her tone brightened with recognition. *Nightwatch* was an *Impellor*-class carrier, a mighty vessel but more designed for transporting TIEs and assault craft than ship-to-ship combat. More notably, its Captain Korak had been Por Dun's partner on the tactical team aboard *Voidwalker*, and like many officers who'd been paired during those desperate weeks they'd ended up close friends.

"Give the captain my regards," he added.

"I'll make sure to do that. Will you be reinforcing other worlds too?"

"Of course. I've gotten Darakon's permission to pull ships from the yards at Yaga Minor and Bilbringi for this too. If we're going to go on the offensive for once we don't want to leave ourselves unprotected from behind."

"I understand. Frankly, sir, I hope one good punch can send them scrambling back to where they came."

"We all hope that, Captain. For now I'll be doing the punching and you'll be protecting our citizens. Understood?"

"Absolutely, sir. Is there anything else?"

He took a datacard from his pocket and handed it to her. "Only my official marching orders, in writing, including that Captain Verdon and Meleti are subordinate to you for the duration of the assignment."

She took it eagerly. "Thank you, *sir*."

He scooted off the edge of his desk and snapped a salute, which she returned. When they lowered arms she added, "Good hunting, *sir*. And good luck."

When she left and he was alone in his office again he turned to face the viewport and watched *Resilience* and the other docked ships. He trusted his officers. He trusted the fighting machines that made the Imperial Navy the best ship-for-ship fighting force in the galaxy. But in the end he just didn't know what they were up against, and he could only feel anxious.

Damien Corde had been born on Bastion forty years ago, and in that time he'd watched the capital city of Ravelin swell ever-larger as it filled with imports from outside Imperial space: imported people and imported business, themselves now considered showcases by a government that wanted to remake the Empire into the Alliance in all but name. It was no longer the city he'd grown up in, which was why he preferred to live in the outskirts, where things were still spacious and green and clean and human.

He woke up that morning as he usually did: morning sun lighting the curtains, birds singing outside the window, Valera in the bed beside him. He wanted to linger but one look at the bed-stand chronometer told him he couldn't stay long.

Damien sat halfway upright, planted a kiss on her shoulder, and fought the urge to lay a few more. He rolled out of bed and used the refresher and started changing out of his sleep clothes.

As he was sliding into his trousers Valera, face half-pressed into her pillow, muttered, "What time is it?"

"Time for me to go. I've got an appointment today."

She kicked back the sheets and sat upright, pushing black hair out of her face and pawing at gummy eyes. "Do you know when you'll be back?"

"Can't say, sorry."

"Right," she exhaled. They'd gone over this last night. "Do you think you'll give me word, at least? Let me know if you'll be gone a while?"

"I'll drop you a line once the meeting's over."

She nodded dutifully; she knew not to expect any more. A yawn took her and she hid it, embarrassed. "Late night," she muttered behind her hand.

"Don't I know it," he bent over, and kissed his wife twice, on cheek and forehead. "Don't worry about me. I'll be back."

"Sooner or later." She fell back onto the bedspread.

Damien wanted to linger more but he knew he couldn't. He pulled back from the bed, threw on his black formal jacket, and marched out of the bedroom and down the stairs. A cup of strong caf was all he needed in the morning. It gave him a jolt that lasted him through the long slow rush-hour crawl into the center of Ravelin, where alien banks and megacorporations were still putting up sky-climbing new towers that should have stayed on Coruscant where they belonged.

The government buildings, at least, had a staid dignity appropriate for an Imperial city. When he entered the Imperial Security Bureau compound he went through all six security checkpoints without issue. His trim black-and-white civilian suit matched those of all the other bureaucrats checking in for work. The security guards, a mix of humans and droids, probably pegged him as a military man retired to a desk job thanks to his tall wide-shouldered built and short-cropped blond hair. It was a reasonable assumption, one he tried to encourage. The first part, at least, was accurate.

He made his way to the empty meeting room: an oval with cool grey walls and an oblong table. A servant droid offered him a glass of cool water and told him to wait. Once the droid scooted out he did just that, loitering by the window, looking out at the executive administrative building on the opposite side of the Pellaeon Gardens.

The door opened without warning. Damien turned around to see another man who hadn't let his trim martial build soften, despite having another fifteen years on Damien. Instead of a civilian suit, Corrien Veers wore the martial olive-green uniform and rank bars of an Imperial sector governor.

"Right on time as usual, Agent Corde," Veers said.

"Punctuality is my specialty," he spread his hands and smiled. No need to salute; despite the figure and the uniform, Veers had never been part of the Imperial military machine. Before going into politics he'd been an ISB man and Damien's mentor in the arts of intelligence gathering and covert operations. For a sector governor who no longer had official connections with ISB to show up in one of the most secured wings of its headquarters would have alarmed most men, but Damien had been expecting no one else. The moff was close to Director Sojuz and never fully stepped back from anything.

The two of them took seats at the table near the window. After a casual sip from his glass Corde asked, "Are you on Bastion long?"

"Only for the meeting of the Moff Council in two days. Then it's back to Yaga Minor. *You*, Agent Corde, will be gone by then."

He'd expected as much and braced himself. "What's my destination, sir?"

Veers smirked. "Not what you're thinking. I'm sending you on a courier run to Kuat."

"Kuat?" He blinked. He'd been certain he was about to be sent into the Unknown Regions to gather some special scraps of intelligence about the alien marauders.

"That's right. You're to take the *Wolflight* and go directly there." He took out a datacard and placed it on the table between them. "This contains a coded message. Drop out of hyperspace on the edge of the Kuat system's heliosphere, hold position, and transmit that message. A listening post will hear it and send someone to retrieve you."

"Will I be meeting a Kuati ship?" He tried to hide his confusion.

"Yes, and they'll have something to give you. You'll receive another encrypted datacard. Then you will leave and there will be

no trace that you were ever there." Corde was used to getting in and out of places unnoticed; that usually didn't involve messaging that place's owners and alerting them to his presence. Veers placed his hands on the table. "By the time you're finished I'll be back at Yaga Minor. Bring that card back to me and put it in my hand. Any questions?"

Damien knew better than to ask what was on the card. ISB and Kuat Drive Yards had some of the most secure transmission systems in the galaxy and if that data wasn't considered safe with them it must have been valuable beyond measure. He tried to focus on the mechanics of the mission itself.

"When I reach the rendezvous point will I stay aboard *Wolflight* or will I be transferred to one of their ships?"

"Uncertain, but be prepared for anything. That includes leaving *Wolflight* unmanned at the edge of the system."

Corde had spent a lot of time and effort getting his ship customized; he didn't like risking it, but he nodded anyway. "Understood. One more question, sir?"

"Of course."

"If I'm going there just to receive a datacard there's no cause for me to be dragged out of my ship. Is there anything *else*? Should I expect to meet someone?"

"Words will be exchanged as well as the datacard. You're to report them exactly as they occurred."

He was playing it tight against the chest, even by his standards. "Very well. I'll make sure to remember. Is there anything *else*, sir?"

"For now, no." He leaned back in his chair and he allowed a little smile. "You look confused, Agent Corde."

"Not at all," he lied. "I was expecting to be sent somewhere else, that's all."

"This is a special, *personal* mission and I want you to handle it. ISB has plenty of agents on the borderland already. Not to mention the intelligence we're getting from the Chiss."

Corde had heard about that one. "Is it helpful?"

"Perhaps. The line's going straight to fleet intelligence so I'm not privy to all of it," Veers said, though they both knew he had plenty

of unofficial information channels. Despite never serving in the military he had plenty of Navy contacts, allies he'd known for most of his life. Veers came from the best of Imperial families. His grandfather had served under Lord Darth Vader himself. He was a man who knew what the Empire should be again and was ready to do what it took to bring that about. If he'd been anything less, Damien Corde wouldn't be serving him.

Damien reached across the table and palmed the datacard. "Should I be on my way immediately?"

"Yes. They'll be expecting you."

"All right. If there's nothing else, I'll get started."

"Have a good voyage, Agent Corde. I'll see you at Yaga Minor."

From the meeting room it was ten minutes until Corde was outside ISB headquarters entirely and started walking to the maglev station that would whisk him over to the docking complex where his ship was berthed. He walked the streets of the government district in his black-and-white suit, virtually indistinguishable from all the bland civil servants who kept the government going, but the little datacard in his breast pocket was a heavy weight.

As he walked to took out his comm and hailed his wife. Valera responded promptly; no doubt she'd been waiting for his word all morning.

"Good morning," he said cheerily. "I just finished my meeting."

"That didn't take too long," she said with a note of hope. "How did it go?"

"Meeting went fine. I'm going to have to hop off-planet for a little while. Should be about.... ten days all together." Five days to the Core, five days back. He didn't expect his mysterious Kuati hosts to keep him long.

"Ten days," she echoed, a little more hopeful. "Are you sure?"

"Maybe an extra day, but it's just a blue milk run. Nothing to worry about."

That was enough for her to know he wasn't being sent off into the Unknown Regions like she'd feared. Relief was thick in her voice as she said, "That's good. Be safe."

"I will. I love you."

"I love you too. See you soon."

And with that he flicked off his comlink and kept walking. Valera knew what he did for a living; nothing specific, but she accepted that sometimes he would disappear for weeks, even months, to unknown places to do unknown jobs for the good of the Empire. And when he'd come back he'd bring flowers and a smile and say nothing of where he'd been, and they'd pretend they lived a normal couple's life until he was called away again.

He was lucky to have a woman who could accept that. He'd only had to tell her what he was once. After that she'd understood and been willing to make the necessary sacrifices. It was why he loved her. She was as much a patriot as he was.

CHAPTER SIX

It was good that the One Sith had taught him patience, because uncovering the would-be murderer inside the Fountain Palace was a slow and painstaking process. Much of that came from the difficulty of moving around the tightly secured structure. As a Chiss, Darth Terrid would be instantly recognizable as an outsider, so stealth was required at all times. The One Sith had humans who could have done this job more easily, but Darth Avanc had chosen Terrid for it. Most certainly, he'd discussed it with Darth Wyyrlok first. They'd conferred the rank of Sith Lord on him years ago, but still they were testing him. He tried to salvage their distrust with the knowledge that these tests were honing his skills.

The One Sith had mapped all of the Palace except the queen's most inaccessible wings and using this guide he managed to find private places to rest. Doing what needed to be done was trickier. He'd been taught how to use the Force to scrub security sensors but having to do it for every room and corridor he entered meant things proceeded very slowly. He used the narrow secret passages built into the palace whenever possible and was able to tap into the computer database from an access panel in one of those corridors.

From there he could review all the details Queen Lohr's security people had gathered about the attempted assassinations.

Hapan Security deserved their reputation for thoroughness. They'd listed all the staff who'd prepared each meal and created a register of possible vessels inbound to Hapes that had passed through Dreena or Vergill within the past month. There was no guarantee that the assassins hadn't gathered the spider-blood and devil-grass from other parties away from those planets, but they'd rightly deemed it worth investigating.

That was useful information, but Terrid filed it away. The real question, which the security team had been unable to answer- was how the poisons had gotten into the queen's meals in the first place. Three totally different cooking teams had prepared each meal, and from reviewing their personnel files there didn't seem to be a connection between them. Terrid also doubted that the would-be assassin would trust at least three different agents to do her bidding.

The obvious solution was that a droid had somehow sneaked the poisons into the food, but Hapans were famously prejudiced against automatons. There were only a handful in the Palace and none had access to the kitchen. Still, he thought the security team had failed because they'd been too focused on the kitchen staff as perpetrators. It had to be something else. He spent his first night in the Palace personally scoping out the cargo container areas and the service hangar where supply ships came in and out. The next morning he observed the process by which a shipful of goods from off-world was imported, checked, and processed. Every container was cataloged and tagged. Any unusual activity would have been noted in the investigation team's logs. It should have been impossible for the poisonous materials to have been brought into the Palace at all.

When realization came he cursed himself for its not coming sooner. The impasse was only an impasse if you took the security team's report as fact.

Operating on the principle that the conspirators would be as few in number as possible, he began to check the information on the security team who'd investigated the poisonings. The team leader was a niece of the queen, which didn't mean she was loyal, but there were more likely candidates. He identified a pair of newer

security officers, both assigned to the Palace for less than two years and used the security apparatus to track them. He cataloged their movements, where they ate, who they talked to. By the second day of his investigation he supposed he knew more about the Fountain Palace's staff than the queen herself.

What roused his interest was the one named Weila Panal. She was the second-newest officer on the team and she knew the layout to the Palace's scanners well. After watching her for two days he marked three times when she disappeared from view for thirty standard minutes or more. When she came back into view at the end of each incident the scanners picked up the same young man appearing in the same area, walking in the opposite direction.

It could have been an illicit affair, nothing more, but there was one way to know for sure.

When Terrid slipped into her bedroom late at night she didn't rouse from sleep. He stepped soundlessly over to her bedside. He gazed down at the woman, lying on her side, gold hair sprawled over her pillow. It would be very easy to kill her, but he knew she wasn't at the heart of this conspiracy. She was a minor functionary, nothing more, a pawn like the young man probably was too.

That was no reason to be gentle. He reached down and grabbed her by the neck. The woman's eyes popped open; a hand shot up to jab him in the elbow but her blow didn't loosen his hold. With his other hand he pinned her free wrist to the bed and loomed over her, the red glow from his eyes faintly lighting her features in the otherwise black room.

Her trachea rattled under his grip but he didn't let go. He leaned very close and whispered, "If you had any part in the plan to poison the queen, don't deny it. I'll know if you're lying."

Her eyes were wide in fright but he could tell he got through to her. He loosened his grip very slightly and asked, "Did you poison the queen's food?"

Her head twitched from side to side. Terror kept her honest. He asked, "Did you erase evidence from the security team's report?"

She froze, staring at his red eyes. He loosened his grip just a little more and she rasped, "Yes."

"Did *he* put you up to it?"

She was starting to tremble, but she nodded.

"His name?"

"Yanar Rolt," she croaked. "I don't know why... When he asked me we were... We were already...."

She'd been seduced. Rolt would be the next step and with access to the security apparatus he'd be easy to track. Someone would be behind Rolt in turn, but Terrid didn't expect many more layers to unpeel. The more complicated a conspiracy the more likely it was to fail.

He released her pinned wrist and whispered, "Sleep now."

He placed that palm against her forehead. She struggled for only a second, then went limp. She started breathing normally again. Her memories would be easy to modify; to her they'd be less than a dream. Darth Terrid set to work, and within three minutes he slipped out of the bedchamber and into the Palace's dark nighttime halls.

There were many different ways to deal with traitors. While Demia Lohr hadn't decided how to handle whatever conspirator the Sith dug up- it would depend mostly on that person's identity- the queen had selected a large audience for this occasion.

A good fifty-some nobles had been gathered in the main convocation hall, ostensibly for the queen's weekly session of holding open court. She'd taken her place on the great gold throne with a fan-shaped back. Lenor Chalk and her granddaughter stood on either side of the dais. Serissa was a mere teenager, not yet twenty, but she'd already grown to have a tall and shapely figure, with long black hair like her mother. She had dark eyes, too, which watched the mingling courtiers dispassionately. Like the rest of them, she thought she was here for the usual mingling, gossip, and posturing. Demia wanted to see how well her granddaughter withstood the coming surprise.

When she was ready she gave the subtle signal with her hands, and Lenor called for everyone's attention. Demia remained motionless on her throne as she watched all eyes swing to her,

curious, a little surprised. Most look like expected banal regal chatter, but a few seemed to suspect there was more. Demia spotted Ducha Reshul in the far corner of the room, and from her expression she looked like one of the latter. She didn't show any panic or make moves toward the chamber exit, beside which four guards had just quietly inserted themselves.

"Her Royal Majesty the Queen Mother wishes to address the court," Lenor said, loud and firm.

Lenor stepped aside. Demia spared a tiny sideways glance at her granddaughter, who frowned her confusion but said nothing. Without rising from the throne, Demia said, "Would Ducha Reshul please come forward?"

Too late, realization struck her. Her jaw dropped a little; she froze but did not move. The couriers slowly turned to eye the woman in the back.

A queen did not repeat herself. She waited for Reshul to finally start shuffling toward the royal dais. To her credit she composed herself quickly. She tilted her head up and said with dignity, "What may I do for you, Majesty?"

"You may answer a question for the entire court. Tell us, Ducha, how it came to be that your personal aide was seen consorting with the leader of the pirate gangs that have been attacking ships in the Lorelli Reach?"

Reshul's steel-gray brows drew together in a good imitation of confusion. "I've never heard of such a thing. May I ask where you heard this?"

"Do you doubt the resources of the Throne?"

"Of course not." She dipped her head in a quick bow. "I merely find such a thing hard to believe."

"Pirates have been running free in the Reach for months. When you failed to corral them, as was your duty, my personal investigators were sent to deal with the problem. What they found, Ducha, was *most* disturbing."

"Majesty--"

"Do *not* speak out of turn. What they found was that exactly two days after every successful raid, a set amount of credits was deposited in an account in a Raltiiri bank owned by you."

Confusion widened Reshul's eyes and anger narrowed them. She knew she was trapped and knew her objections would gain her nothing.

"On further investigation," Demia went on, "Your aide Mena Drashi has been observed meeting with members of this pirate gang on Telkur Station on three separate occasions, most recently six standard days ago. Two days ago, right after you left Andalia to attend to your duties here, agents of this court intercepted Mena Drashi and obtained the truth from her. For six months you've been sending information on shipment transit routes to the pirates and have accepted regular payments for your actions. Because of you, other members of their court have lost irreplaceable valuables as well as credits and peace of mind. Your actions will not go unpunished."

She paused before going on and waited for the murmurs to run through the audience. There was an anger in those murmurs; many of the assembled had indeed lost valuables to Reshul's pirate friends. They were hungry for compensation and it was all directed to the woman standing in front of the throne. Like the noble she was, Reshul did not embarrass herself by bleating objections to claims which she knew were fact. More, she'd seen Demia publicly humiliate misbehaving courtiers before punishment. She knew what came next and resolved herself to face disgrace with dignity.

"Ducha Reshul," Demia said, "All evidence against you will be made public. Those whose property was lost on your watch will be able to file claims for pieces of your liquidated properties. The role of Ducha of Andalia will pass to your niece. You, Convict Reshul, are sentenced to spend the next twenty years in confinement for your crimes."

The old woman wavered on her feet. Her eyes lidded shut and for a moment it seemed like she would faint; then she opened them, took a deep breath, and straightened herself.

"As you know, I'm not without mercy," Demia added. "Once those twenty years have passed, if you are still alive you will be allowed to live on whichever planet in the Consortium you chose, under minimal supervision. You will not, however, lay any claim to royal privilege again. Do you understand?"

Reshul nodded with dignity. "Is there anything *else* you require of me, Majesty?"

"No. The sentence has been passed." Demia signaled with her left hand and two guards stepped out to take Reshul by the shoulders. The old woman jerked their hands off her, spared one last look at the queen, then marched for the exit, guards on either flank, staring dead ahead and avoiding eye contact with any of her accusing peers.

When the doors closed, Lenor announced that the queen's special announcement was complete. With pained awkwardness, the courtiers turned away from the throne and began talking among themselves in hushed and urgent tones.

The queen exhaled and glanced at Serissa. The girl kept a good regal mask on. Demia had performed this public shaming and sentencing before, but not often, and Serissa had never attended one personally. Her mother had been there for her share, and Demia could recall the glint of amusement in Melor's eyes when one convicted noble had broken down sobbing for mercy, ruining her chances for it with such a shameful display. That streak of sadism should have been a warning, but Demia hadn't realized how badly her daughter coveted a queen's power until it was nearly too late.

Serissa was different. Demia could see through her granddaughter's mask to spot the distaste there; not just distaste for Reshul but for the entire sordid spectacle of exposing her before so many courtiers who'd shared the same treasonous desires and only lacked the courage to carry them out.

Ruling the Hapes Consortium was a sordid, ugly, draining business. When she'd taken power from the Jedi witch all those years ago, Demia hadn't understood that. She'd allowed power's glamor to entice her and blinded herself to the grueling realities.

Rule was a burden, but to preserve the Consortium from the Jedi and the Alliance it had to be shouldered. Serissa seemed like she understood that. It gave Demia hope.

Quietly, so no one else could hear, she asked, "Do you want to retire? This audience will last a while yet."

Serissa shook her head. "I'll stay with you, Grandmother."

A good answer. A ruler had to be seen. Demia turned her attention to all the gossiping courtiers once more and allowed herself to wonder which of the women arrayed before her had attempted her murder. She'd heard nothing yet from the Sith, but she had faith they'd give answer. Demia hadn't decided whether to humiliate the conspirator as she had Reshul, but one thing was certain. For attempted regicide the only punishment was death. She'd passed that judgment on her own daughter. After that, she could pass it on anyone.

The queen's decision to call for a convocation session had caused a sudden tightening of security that slowed Darth Terrid's investigation significantly. After the old Ducha was dragged down into the prison from which she wouldn't return things finally started to relax once more.

Interrogating Yanar Rolt was more difficult than getting to Weila Panal. The security officer had her own private quarters in which she could be cornered. Rolt, like most of the young men in the Palace, acted as dual servant and decoration, and male chattel like him were afforded only bunks in dormitories. Terrid therefore had to monitor the young man's activities, discern his schedule, and figure out a time when he would not be missed.

That moment came in the hour between his dinner in the servant's mess and his night duties. Terrid placed himself in wait behind the locked door to a supply cabinet for hours until he sensed Rolt walking down the hall. The corridor was otherwise clear; it took all of five seconds to open the door and drag Rolt inside.

He locked the door and clamped hard on the man's mouth to keep him from screaming. Pressing him against the hard wall Terrid stabbed the fingers of his free hand into Rolt's hard

abdomen. The man writhed; Terrid summoned the anger inside him and sparks from his hands jumped through the human's body. He screamed into the blue palm tight on his face. Terrid gave another spark and felt Rolt's resistance weaken.

"I know what you did," Terrid whispered. He could see the gleam of his red eyes reflected in the human's fright-wide pupils. "You tried to murder your queen. Triphenyl potion, Dreenan spider-fish blood, Vergillian devil-grass. You put it in her food supplies and made your mistress erase your meddling from her security report."

He tried to wag his head in denial but Terrid squeezed it hard. "Don't. Officer Panal has no loyalty to you. I know you didn't think of this yourself. You're a tool like she is. Now tell me."

His body trembled and he squeezed his eyes shut, like he was trying to wake himself up from a nightmare. He bled raw panic into the Force, but Terrid tried to pry deeper. There was more than just shock and fear; there was a strength in there too. He wouldn't crack easily. He was protecting someone.

Of course he would be. Likely the stupid young man had been seduced just as he'd wooed Panal. The entire situation was insufferably trite. Petty scheming nobles played emotional games with their pawns to manipulate them to selfish ends. As a Sith he might have admired the clever manipulation and ruthlessness of whoever was pulling these puppets' strings but it was all for so disgustingly low stakes. To be a Sith was to remake the universe as you desired using all your strength. These Hapans destroyed each other for scraps of power in an isolated backwater. Having to deal with them at all was degrading.

Terrid let that anger resonate within him. His desire for more, his hatred for what he had, fueled him and lengthened the claws he was prying into Rolt's pathetic mind. He bent in close and pressed his forehead against the human's. He tried to shake himself free but Terrid merely clasped him tighter. He reached deeper into the fool's mind and found what he'd expected: pathetic devotion to a woman and more, almost a kind of worship. Rolt drew strength from his adoration but Terrid was a Sith, and it was not difficult to pry

deeper into his mind and draw out the vivid sensations flitting inside it: recalled smell and touch and sound, the curves that defined a human figure and face. He lingered on those curves to burn the geography of the woman's appearance into his memory so he could search for her later, only to realize that wasn't necessary,

He knew exactly who was trying to kill the queen. In was almost too obvious.

He pulled his head back, loosened his grip, and retreated back into himself. Rolt panted; his eyes flicked around the dark closet like he'd forgotten where he was. When they rested on Terrid's glowing red gaze his breathing quickened again.

The Sith Lord loosened his grip. He said, "I have what I need from you. Now you can forget."

Minutes later, Rolt walked out of the closet. He was uncertain why he'd been there; he looked up and down the outside corridor, then back inside the empty chamber. He closed the door and staggered down the hall without looking back. Even the memory of confusion would fade away in minutes. Rolt would remember nothing at all of his encounter.

The Sith Lord was already done by then, retreated into the secret corridors that had become almost familiar to him. He was close to the end of his duties here, but the greatest step had to be taken. It had been easy to capture the security officer and the servant. Getting the truths from their minds had been simple. It would be very different with Serissa Lohr, but Darth Terrid had no doubt it could be done.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Every hyperspace jump felt fraught with risk nowadays, and to Por Dun it was a comfort to revert to realspace over Valc VII and see a cluster of friendly ships waiting. It was by far the most populated world in Perrin Sector and the closest major Imperial planet to the Unknown Regions. Even before these attacks had started it had possessed a trio of Golan IV orbital defense stations and a small local fleet. Now it bristled with much more. *Conviction* and *Ascension*, two-kilometer long destroyers of the same class as *Resilience*, sat over Valc VII at opposite poles. As *Resilience* drew nearer to the planet its sensors reported a third ship rounding the planet's ecliptic. At three and a half kilometers long, it possessed the classic Kuati wedge shape with the pointed bow chopped short and ending with a dozen broad hangar-mouths.

"*Nightwatch* is hailing us, captain," the comm lieutenant reported. "They say they're prepared to welcome you aboard at your convenience."

Por Dun hadn't been expecting a face-to-face talk before *Nightwatch* shipped out to join Admiral Fel's fleet at Ord Thoden, but she probably should have. Its captain was, after all, an old friend.

"Tell them I'll be over shortly. Tell the deck crew to prepare a shuttle. First Officer, you have the bridge."

By the time her shuttle was prepped, *Resilience* had drawn close to *Nightwatch* on the outer edge of Valc VII's gravity well. As the craft carried her from the star destroyer to the fleet carrier she peered out the passenger cabin's porthole window at the world beyond. Greens and browns, blues and whites mixed together, and a clusters of urban gray dotted its larger continents. A planet of five billion people, she recalled. Nothing compared to more urbanized worlds like Bastion or Muunlist, to say nothing of Coruscant, but still a major Imperial world, a sector capital, which she'd been charged to protect. A small part of her wished she could have joined Korak and Admiral Fel on the mission into the Unknown Regions, but someone had to keep the homefront safe and she was proud to have been chosen.

It had been several years since she'd met Benyon Korak face-to-face, but when she marched down the shuttle ramp into one of *Nightwatch's* broad hangars she saw that he hadn't changed much: the same round pale face, the dark eyes and brown hair that was a little longer and messier than expected for a human captain. Por Dun had grown up with a colony of Kel Dor refugees who'd fled the Yuuzhan Vong and settled into a system later assimilated by the Empire. When she'd first attended the naval academy she'd had a hard time telling all those humans apart. As her partner on *Voidwalker's* tactical team, two ensigns on their first assignment thrust into a desperate fight to survive, Korak had become the first human she'd ever trusted, the first face she'd learned to read.

They shook hands quite formally, and with a pair of silent stormtrooper escorts in tow they navigate *Nightwatch's* hallways and lifts until they reached Korak's private cabin, where the guards finally let them alone.

Despite having a bigger ship, Korak's living space was the same size as hers and similarly appointed. As Por Dun dropped into a soft chair Korak asked, "Do you mind if I have anything?"

"Go ahead," she said. Like oxygen itself, most substances humans enjoyed were noxious or outright lethal to Kel Dor.

When he sat down on the sofa opposite hers with some amber-colored drink in his hand he said, "I guess congratulations are in order for the job at Nesporis III."

"It was the admiral's plan."

"I know. Honestly, when word came down I was a little jealous. He's had me here babysitting Valc for the past two months."

"Now our situations are reversed."

"I guess so." He took a sip. "You'll be getting a formal greeting from the governor. He'll invite you down to the planet for some kind of formal greet-and-brief session."

"Isn't this a greet-and-brief too?"

"Yes, but a lot less formal." Korak hunched forward. "You've fought those raiders before. I haven't. What can you tell me I haven't already read in reports?"

She shrugged. It was one of those human gestures she'd learned to mimic. "You've probably seen it all. It's difficult to counter their tactics because they don't *have* tactics. They move like packs of wild akk dogs, going after anything insight. They attack without fear of dying."

"Doesn't sound like any pirates I know."

"No. It doesn't make sense to me either. We thought capturing some of them alive would give us answer but instead it's bred more questions."

In the grim silence Korak took another drink, then said, "I heard the admiral's going to get Jedi onboard for this again."

"I hope he does."

"He's back on Bastion now, right, getting approval from the moffs."

She nodded, another mimicked gesture. "I should think they'd approve after Nesporis III."

"You can never be sure. Opposition to Jedi can be... intransigent. And irrational."

She knew the same opposition held toward non-humans in Imperial service. The Empire had changed much in a hundred years, but not in all ways.

"The admiral will do what needs to be done," she said.

Korak nodded confidently and drank again. They both believed it; their experiences on *Voidwalker* under Davek Fel, a junior grade lieutenant turned captain, had created a bond between its seven-hundred-odd surviving crew. Of that number their little frigate had yielded one fleet admiral, two vice admirals, and a dozen captains for a variety of ships. After that experience not all of the Voidwalkers had wanted to continue in service to the Empire, but those who had quickly found themselves climbing ranks.

"When does *Nightwatch* ship out to Ord Thoden?" she asked.

"Four hours, which is why I wanted to tell you as much as a I could while I'm still here." Korak placed his glass on the low table and straightened. "Ready for the second half of the meet-and-brief?"

"Of course I am."

"All right. Let me start with those Golan stations," he said, and the briefing began.

It was a product of the Empire's strange halting transition from dictatorship to oligarchy to democracy that Davek found himself presenting his campaign plan to a committee of elected civilian sector governors on Bastion. A century ago the Empire's moffs had been drawn from military ranks, and all these years later they still more military uniforms and wore military badges, even though they'd been selected via popular vote since Vitor Reige's reforms forty years ago. They also still retained the ability to approve or disapprove military operations, even though most of them had never been on the bridge of a star destroyer in their lives.

When Davek finished his briefing the first comment came from Moff Perris, a businessman turned governor of the Albarrio Sector. "I see you've provisioned a lot of ships to guard worlds close to the border. What about the *other* sectors?"

It was the question Davek had expected. Perris' territory was on the opposite side of Imperial space from the threatened zones. Very politely he said, "My purview is the Fourth Fleet, which is charged with securing the border regions. I think Admiral Darakon might better speak to that directly."

The navy's supreme commander was sitting next to Davek and didn't seem averse to having the question shoved his way. "As I believe we explained, Moff Perris, the Second Fleet is still gathered at Yaga Minor. From its position it should be able to react to threats in the Albarrio, Velcar and Presbelt Sectors promptly."

"You'll be keeping them on full combat alert?"

"Of course. We've been working closely with Admiral Grave during every step of mission planning."

Perris seemed to be satisfied with that. Davek had heard the talking heads on the newsnets claim he was the face of the Imperial Navy's future, but they often said that of Grave too. They were both young for fleet admirals, barely forty, but the similarities didn't go much further, which was probably why those talking heads rarely mentioned them both at once.

"I have a different concern," said Moff Veers. Yaga Minor's governor was said to be close allies with Admiral Grave, not least because they shared a nostalgia for elements of the Empire's past that Davek preferred to forget. "This whole battle plan is predicated on the idea that the intelligence the Chiss shared is complete and accurate. That is too big an assumption for my liking."

It was the kind of question Davek expected from a man with an ISB background. He told Veers, "Nothing the Chiss has given us has contradicted our own intelligence sources. If anything they've reinforced each other."

"I'm less worried about inaccuracies and more about omissions. I realize your perspective on the matter is somewhat different from ours, but the Chiss are an insular people with secrets they value closely."

Davek decided not to respond to the bait about his family ties. "The Empire also values its secrets. Every government does. The simple fact is that the Chiss has given us the most complete picture of the raiders' movements available. We have that information. It would be a shame not to act on it. We can't wait for the enemy to attack us again and again."

Veer held up his hands. "I'm all for an offensive approach, Admiral. I was just giving you a warning."

"The warning is well taken," Darakon said. "We made no choices lightly. In the end, we decided we had no choice but to trust the Chiss intelligence."

Veers looked unconvinced, but settled back in his chair to signify he'd said his piece.

"There's one other thing that concerns me," said Entralla's Moff Thane. "I think you all know what it is."

"The Jedi were invaluable at Nesporis III," Davek said firmly. This, too, he'd expected push-back on. "We need to use every tool we have on this offensive. I've also carefully integrated them into the battle plan to use each knight as efficiently as possible."

"No one doubts your familiarity with the Jedi Order," Veers said, another smooth dig, "But it's the same problem as relying on outsiders' intelligence."

"One of the Jedi *died* at Nesporis. Are you really doubting their loyalty?"

"I think," Moff Perris said carefully, "That as long as we continue to authorize knights who've been trained on Bastion *only*, Jedi who are also Imperial citizens, this is acceptable."

"Agreed," said the flickering holo-image of Moff Moran, who was still on Valc VII. With his homeworld close to the firing line he appreciated any help.

"A mission based on Chiss intelligence and relying on Jedi magic," Moff Thane said with a sigh. "This is a sad day for the Empire. I cannot approve."

"To start this battle plan we need only a majority vote," Admiral Darakon said. "Unless there's any more questions, I suggest we put it to the test. If put down, Admiral Fel and I will rework our plan and present it to the Council again in short order."

That was standard procedure, but they all knew the longer they dragged out mission planning the more time the enemy had to launch another strike. Every day, every hour could be important. They'd already spent too long jumping through procedural hurdles when they should have been hurting the enemy.

After looking around the table Bastion's Moff Orren said, "I believe there's no objections, so we might as well get started."

The vote was as simple as Darakon calling out for ayes and nays. Davek stayed in his seat, hands clasped tight beneath the tabletop to hide his tension. Moff Moran raised his hands in approval, as did Moff Perris. When Moff Veers also signaled his support Davek was shocked; then he realized they'd won.

When the count was called Moff Thane wilted in his seat. "I hope you gentlemen don't regret what happens here today."

"We voted to safeguard Imperial citizens," Moran said firmly. "I don't see any cause for regret at all."

"You wouldn't," Thane said under his breath, then rose. "Gentlemen, I have to get back to Entralla. I'm sure we'll discuss the results of this vote later."

He was the first one out, and others followed, nays first. Moff Moran's holo-image winked out. Davek and Darakon remained seated until the last moff lingered at the chamber's exit.

Before stepping out Veers turned and looked down at the admirals. "You're probably wondering why I voted the way I did."

Davek was, but he hadn't expected Veers to confront the issue like this. "Are you going to tell us?"

"Moff Moran says he wanted to safeguard Imperial citizens, but we all know he voted the way he did because Valc VII is too close to the edge for comfort."

"No one expects moffs to make decisions out of altruism," Davek said.

Veers acknowledged the dig with a faint smile. "Frankly, I would have voted for just about any proposal as long as the Prefsbelt Sector stayed secure. And as long as Admiral Graves commands the Second and keeps his ships at Yaga Minor I think I could withstand just about anything." To Darakon he added, "You have fine young commanders in your navy. It does you credit." The supreme commander responded with a curt nod. Veers looked back to Davek. "That said, the warning I voiced still stands. For your sakes, gentlemen, I hope you know what you're doing."

Davek hoped it too. He gave Veers another little nod, which ended things. Veers left the room without another word.

Davek released breath but resisted the urge to slump in his chair. Admiral Darakon was relatively open-minded about getting help from Jedi and non-humans but he drew the line at breaching professional decorum.

"We've done everything we can do here, Admiral," the supreme commander said. "I suggest you prepare the quickest flight back to Ord Thoden."

"I will." Davek pushed himself out of the chair and to his feet. "Thank you for supporting my plan, Admiral."

"It's *our* plan now," the older man said. "Regardless of how Veers meant me to take it he was right. I do have talented young admirals."

"Thank you, sir."

"Get going, Admiral Fel. You have a lot of work to do."

As he walked out of the naval headquarters building Davek's mind was already busy with all the things he'd need to do at Ord Thoden before the attack force launched, all the things he should do first while his shuttle was en route.

But first, he knew he had to say goodbye to his family. Before going into any potential combat mission he sought out his parents and his brother, his sons and wife, and said goodbye to them in the flesh. You could never be sure when a mission would spin radically out of control; you never knew if you'd come back. It was a something he'd learned seventeen years ago and every day he counted himself lucky to be living its lesson.

Jagged knew what it was like when your battle plan was approved and you had to spring into action and do three dozen things at once, so he was grateful that his son spared a little time to talk before being whisked off Ord Thoden. He'd stayed the past few nights in the Fel family's condominium and slept in his old bedroom. He'd kept all his luggage too, which amounted to a single case, never unpacked, like officers did when their jobs had them on the move. Jagged knew that well also, but then, Davek was the son who'd always reminded him of himself.

He didn't think he'd told Davek that, not in those exact words, but it was a plain thing to see. He was sure he'd never commented on the similarities Davek's wife bore to Jaina- small, dark-haired, intent and willful, snubfighter pilot and Jedi. His thoughts dwelled on them as he watched Davek and Marasiah both circle around the living room, making sure they'd grabbed everything.

"You'll be stopping by the Jedi academy on the way, won't you?" Jag asked from his chair by the window.

"Of course," said Davek. "We have to say goodbye to Roan and Vitor. And pick up Arlen."

"I'm sure your mother will take good care of them."

"She always has." Davek stopped in the center of the room, hands on his hips, and gave one last look-over. "I think we're good to go."

"Thank you for letting us stay here," Marasiah added. She was still more formal than Jaina had ever been. But then, she was still Imperial at heart.

"My pleasure. We don't get the family together as often as we should."

"Duty always calls," said Davek. "You know that."

"I do," Jag allowed a little sigh. "I've got a question before you go."

"Of course."

Jag gestured to the nearby sofa. Marasiah and Davek sat down, the son closer to his father. Jag said, "Can you tell me how the vote broke down when the moffs decided to approve the mission?"

Davek recounted the conference quickly, noting who'd voted for and against. It tallied with what Jag had expected and he said so.

"I was surprised about Moff Veers," Davek added. "He was vocally critical about parts of the plan."

"Veers is a clever one. He knows a battle plan, either the one you made or one very like it, had to be approved on short order. If things go well, he can rightly say he voted for it. If you fail, he can rightly say he told you so."

"He said it was because no matter what I do, Admiral Grave will protect his sector. Which sounds true as far as it goes."

"I've never understood his reputation," Marasiah muttered. "Grave does well in training exercises, but he's never been in a major conflict like we have."

"When it comes to advancement in peacetime it's as much about politics as demonstrated ability," Jag said. "He's from an old family. He espouses all the old Imperial pieties that make moffs like Veers and Thane happy."

"Did Veers shepherd his career at all?"

Jag shrugged. "Yes and no. Grave came from Bescane, not Veers' territory at all, but once he started getting good scores at the academy he piqued people's interests. And he knew how to gain favors from his superiors. I'd say, regardless of their personal feelings for each other, Veers and Grave have been using each other to advance themselves."

Marasiah sighed. "This is why I'm glad I left the military."

"Even the Jedi aren't free from politics," Davek pointed out.

"In Jedi politics you can trust you're on the same side until the other guy's eyes start turning yellow," Jagged said. "So it's a bit simpler."

"I do wish...." Davek started, then trailed off.

"Say it," Marasiah prodded. Through either the Force or spousal intuition she knew what he was getting at.

Davek looked at his father. "After all this time I'd just hoped the Empire would be... different. That we'd all *be* on the same side, sharing the same values, working for the same purpose."

Davek was forty years old, a decorated admiral with two growing sons, but sometimes he still seemed so young.

"Let me ask you a question, both of you. What is the Empire *for*?" When neither responded Jagged said, "That's always been the question. The Empire was what Palpatine made. A Sith Lord made a cruel government in his own image and ruled like a tyrant for twenty-five years. That was almost a century ago but this Imperial Remnant- and be honest, that's what it is, a remnant- still exists. What is the Empire without an emperor? It's clearly something, if it's lasted so long without one. But what *is* it?"

"That's a hard issue," Davek muttered.

"It's the central one. No one's been able to find an answer and make everyone agree on it which is why it keeps on being asked. My opinion is that the Empire *is itself* question. It's that exact question and it's been waiting for an answer all this time."

"What kind of answer?" asked Marasiah.

Jagged shrugged. "I hoped I could make the Empire more like the Alliance. More democratic, more open to outside contact, more equal for all sentients."

"You've accomplished that," Marasiah said. "You, Reige, and Pellaeon. Things have changed drastically from the Empire my grandparents grew up in."

Jag shook his head. "The history books always say it was the three of us but there were so many more. Governments aren't made by three people or even one. Palpatine made his Empire because he had countless soldiers willing to follow orders, admirals and moffs ready to knife each other's backs to get his favor, trillions ready to suck up his propaganda."

"You're saying your reforms happened because people *wanted* them to happen," Jag said.

"In a way. But people also wanted a Palpatine to rule over them because it made them feel safe." His smile was faint, wry. "A person's desires don't always make sense, and they're not always mutually compatible."

"A lot of people want to feel safe now," Marasiah said, "For a lot of different reasons."

"Different leaders provide different solutions for that. Veers and his ilk provide one. You two provide another, I think."

"What about Avaris?" Davek asked.

"Avaris is what she is." Jag said simply. "The Empire's had better leaders and worse ones. Of course I wish we had someone who could keep the Veers and Thanos to the sides and manage the moffs better, but we have what we elected and democracy means, in the end, that a people get the government they deserve. I said an Empire without an emperor is a question waiting to be answered. The Empire now is what we choose it to be."

"People don't always make the right choice," Marasiah said.

"I know. But it's their choice regardless. That was the best answer I could come up with." Jag looked at his son. "Of the moffs on the council now, which one do you think is most open to *new* answers?"

Davek frowned. "You mean who's the most open to the Jedi, the Alliance?" Jag nodded. "I suppose I'd say... Moff Moran, probably."

It matched Jag's own judgment. "For months now I've been trying to get Avaris to invoke the Anaxes Treaty, or at least request help from more Jedi besides the ones from Bastion. She won't do anything unless she thinks the moffs are already on her side."

"You'll never win over ones like Veers or Thane, but Moran... I think he's amenable, and he has allies. It helps that he's got raiders breathing down his neck."

"Is he still on Bastion?"

"No, he commed into the meeting. He's on Valc VII."

The man stayed close to the firing line instead of running; Jag nodded with approval. "All right. I think I'll pay him a visit."

"Now?"

"With that raider-breath down his neck, this is the best time to ask for his support." Jagged saw the worry in Davek's eyes and added, "I'll be fine. You have, what, four star destroyers keeping watch there?"

"Three." He sounded like it was three picket ships.

"Then I'll be fine." He put a bony hand on his son's knee and squeezed it. "Don't worry. I plan to keep meddling in Imperial politics for years to come."

"You're more... durable than I am," Marasiah said.

"I blame the Jedi. It was Luke Skywalker who started me on all this. Speaking of which, weren't you going to stop by the academy?"

"That's right." Davek got to his feet. "We need to get going."

Jagged stood too, more slowly. "I'm sorry for keeping you."

"No, this was a good talk. It gave me a lot to think about."

"Oh, no. You're not going to be thinking about big questions when you've got a battle to fight. Save the abstractions for later and focus on the job in front of you."

"More good advice."

"It's what I'm here for. Do you want the lecture on raising teenage sons?"

Marasiah piped, "It's appreciated, but we don't have the time."

"Fair enough," Jag said, and exchanged hugs with both of them. They gathered their things. He waved them goodbye. They slipped out the door, leaving him alone in a living room that was suddenly empty and quiet.

After taking a moment to gather his strength, he shuffled into his study to start reviewing Moff Moran's personal information. He'd said it like a joke, but it was true: old as he was, he couldn't bring himself to stop trying to shape the Empire into something new and different from the one his father had served. Whenever he thought on his children and grandchildren he knew it was the least he could do.

"I don't know how long I'll be gone," Arlen told his daughter, "But until I'm back you do exactly what your grandmother tells you to, you understand?"

Marin rolled her eyes. "Like normal, you mean?"

"Like normal."

"I'm glad you're raising your kids right," Jaina said as she leaned in the doorway.

"Aren't I, though?" Arlen smiled and mussed his daughter's hair, making her wince. He didn't want her to feel how anxious he was about the coming mission.

Marin ducked her head out from under him and took a step back so she could look him in the eye. "Just don't do anything dumb, Dad."

Arlen snorted. "Me? Why would I do anything stupid?"

"Mom tells me stories sometimes."

"Your mother's one to talk." Arlen looked to Jaina for assistance. "Tell her there's a fine line between bravery and stupidity."

"There is," the old woman said, "But it can be really hard to spot."

"Well, that's why we have the Force. It tells us to stop ourselves before we do anything dumb," Arlen said. He wasn't sure if that was true or not, but Marin seemed to take a little comfort from it.

"It's time to get going," Jaina said. "Davek just called. His shuttle's on its way."

That was it, then. Arlen put hands on his daughter's shoulders and with a little eye-roll she let him pull her close, hug her, and kiss her forehead. She disengaged quickly, and after that Arlen began to walk with his mother toward the hangar.

"Was I like that at her age?" he asked once Marin was out of earshot.

"You were pretty bad. Davek was worse, actually."

"Really?" Arlen frowned. He'd been four years older than his brother and Davek hadn't spent much time around the Jedi. Their childhoods had been parallel and separate and so had their adolescence. In some ways he'd only started feeling close to Davek as an adult. That their children were all training to be Jedi was one factor. The closer cooperation between the Jedi Order and the Empire was another.

When they reached the hangar, Arlen saw the most irrefutable proof of that. Thirty Jedi had gathered, dressed in brown tunics over white robes, lightsabers at their belts. All of them had been born and trained in Imperial space and most of them, Arlen knew, felt a personal loyalty to the government they'd grown up under. Arlen felt some of that loyalty himself, but not as much as most of the younger knights, and their patriotism was something he'd become used to if never quite comfortable with.

They'd muster out soon onto different ships according to Davek's battle plan. It was very likely some of them would die; Arlen touched the spot on his side, still lightly sensitive, where the Tylonian blade had stabbed him. The thought of leaving Marin without a father terrified him, but if he wasn't willing to face danger he couldn't call himself a Jedi.

Jaina hooked her arm around his and added, "Your brother said something else on the comm. It sounds like your father's going to go to Valc VII to woo their local moff."

Arlen wanted to be surprised, but his parents, like his grandparents before them, seemed incapable of settling into retirement. "What does he want from this Moff exactly?"

"He's still trying to get the council to invoke the Anaxes Treaty and ask for help from the Alliance and the Jedi Order."

It sounded like a very long shot to Arlen, but those were the kinds his father seemed to take. "I guess it's worth a try. But Lowbacca's planning an expedition into the Unknown Regions anyway, isn't he?"

His mother nodded. For a time it had looked like Jaina herself would succeed Ben Skywalker as Grand Master of the Jedi Order, but the vote had ultimately gone on the Wookiee. Politics had played a role; Allana had just been elected head of the Alliance and her cousin in charge of the Jedi would have had more people talking a Jedi takeover. Arlen had approved of the decision for other reasons. He'd trained under Lowbacca and trusted the Wookiee more than any Jedi besides his mother. More, it gave Jaina a chance to spend time on Bastion with her grandchildren and husband instead of shouldering the weight of the Order on Ossus. Arlen's parents would never lay down and retire, but they could at least be allowed a healthy share of breathers.

A wind howled in from outside and a shuttle swooped into view. As it kicked in its repulsors and sailed through the hangar mouth Jaina tightened her grip on her son's arm.

"Davek?"

She nodded. "Whatever happens out there, take care of your brother."

"You know I will." As they watched the shuttle set down he added, "You're going to tell him the same thing, aren't you?"

"Of course." She squeezed his arm a little more.

It was, Arlen admitted, the way it should be. Whatever happened next, they were in it together.

With everything else going on to determine the fate of the Empire, Damien Corde wondered what he was doing sitting on the edge of the Kuat system, thousands of kilometers from any planet, moon, or

spacecraft. He knew it wasn't his place to ask why. He'd accepted that a long time ago; a spy had to. Still, he'd have liked to know.

After reaching the system's edge he'd set his modified Corellian freighter into a stationary position. He sent the signal and prepared himself to wait. Six hours and a cup of caf later, just when he was starting to get truly impatient, a ship dropped out of hyperspace right behind his. He couldn't see it from the cockpit but sensors said it was large, probably a corvette. *Wolflight* trembled slightly as the tractor beam locked on.

As the tractors reeled his ship in, he extended the landing gear and killed the engines. They made no attempt to contact his ship and he made no attempt to hail him. Clearly, they didn't want the slightest possibility of a communications leak.

The corvette didn't have a large hangar but there was just enough space on the empty deck to set *Wolflight* down. Damien hesitated before lowering his landing ramp and going out, then decided to tuck a single hold-out blaster at the small of his back, beneath the rim of his plain black jacket. He trusted Veers, but you could never be sure.

There were only three people waiting for him in the empty hangar. Two were guards in what Damien took to be a traditional Kuati outfit with faceless lacquered masks hiding their faces. Each cradled a very modern BlastTech rifle in his arms. Standing in front of them was a human, probably in his fifties, with a shaved-bald head and dark eyes. He was dressed in folded blue robes, belted at the waist with a gold-embroidered sash, again traditional Kuati. As Damien stepped closer he examined the face and tried not to be obvious about it. He'd reviewed public information about important Kuati personages on his way here, and he was near-certain that the man standing in front of him now was Retor of Kuhvult, chairman of Kuat Drive Yards, one of the most wealthy and powerful beings in the galaxy.

In a way it was flattering, but he was mostly intrigued. That Moff Veers would have connections this high up in KDY, a company with ties to the Empire that dated over a century, wasn't surprising. That the corporate chairman would come out here

personally to hand off a data-card was unbelievable, but there he was.

When he stepped square in front of Retor the businessman didn't speak first. Damien looked him in the eye and said, "Thanks for coming to see me. I'm here to pick up a package."

Retor leached into the loose folds of his robe and retrieving a single, simple datacard.

"Did Moff Veers tell you who you'd be meeting?"

"Not specifically."

"Did he tell you what's on this card?"

"No. He did not."

Retor watched him for a second, like he was sensing the truth behind Damien's thoughts. Then he asked, "Would you *like* to know what's on it?"

To lie to this man, Damien decided, would be dangerous. He said instead, "I would, but it's not my place to ask."

"You mean you're leaving it to your employer to decide?"

"I'm just here to do my job."

Retor held out the datacard. Veers took it and placed it in his jacket pocket. Their hands never touched.

"Okay," he breathed, "Is our business done here?"

"It is. You may lift off and depart when ready. Have a pleasant flight back to Imperial space."

Days of travel, hours of waiting, and a minute of talk. He wanted to know what was on that card more than ever, but he said, "It's been good working with you."

Retor nodded. Damien turned on his heel and marched back into his ship without looking back. When he dropped into the cockpit he began warming engines immediately. When *Wolflight* was able he kicked in repulsors, retracted landing gear, and sailed his ship out of the hangar. From there it was easy to fire up the hyperdrives and fling *Wolflight* back toward Imperial space, toward Veers and Valera and whatever future he'd just played his small but important part in creating.

After leaving the hangar, Darth Kroan marched straight to the command deck, and he watched from the viewport as the Imperial agent's ship angled away from the Kuat system and jumped to hyperspace.

It was a meeting he could have sent a subordinate to do. As chairman of the Board of Governors and Chief Executive Officer of the entire shipbuilding conglomerate, he wasn't lacking in employees who could keep a secret. He also wasn't lacking in disposable ones. In this case, though, it had been important to be there.

Even before he'd been educated by the One Sith he'd known not to trust other beings; not their intentions, not their competency. The alliance he'd struck with Corrien Veers had been based of mutual self-interest entirely. To be sure, he'd given the moff the impression that he, too, yearned for the historic glories of Palpatine's empire, and that feigned personal repore had helped solidify their pact. In the end, though, it was all about convenience.

Veers relished a power struggle for the Imperial Remnant so badly he was determined to bring it on himself. Darth Kroan was happy to help him along. Veers wanted guaranteed control over the best of Kuat Drive Yards' new ships, especially the super star destroyer nearing completion, and the data codes Kroan had just given his messenger would ensure just that.

For his part, Kroan's aim was simple. During the Senex-Juvex Rising, Darth Xoran had led a bloody revolt against the sectors' old aristocrats. That had been successful, but the larger effort to destabilize the Alliance and the Jedi had backfired. Xoran herself had been the problem. She'd been too visible, too involved, and once the Jedi learned what she truly was they'd spared no effort to destroy her. When chaos came to Imperial space they'd scour for Sith Lords again. Involvement this time had to be oblique and careful. It was very helpful, Kroan thought, that the Empire produced so many men in love with their own brutality. In shaping that society Darth Sidious had done the best a Sith could hope for.

"Chairman Retor, we are ready to depart," the corvette's captain behind him finally spoke up. "Should we return to Kuat now?"

"Of course," Kroan said. As chairman of the Board of Directors he had a lot of work to do; it was why he'd called Veers' messenger here in the first place. "Take us in when you are ready."

The captain gave the orders and the stars panned away to face the distant but distinct glow of the systems' primary star. Once Kroan got back to Kuat he'd resume the business of running the shipyards and living the life of a construction magnate, but the business of the Sith took precedence above all. He'd continue to work with Veers and help the moff's schemes any way he could. Even without his help they'd find some reason to start killing each other; he was simply nudging them along.

There was no surprise in that. It was a galaxy filled with vermin after all, and only the Sith had the power to truly rule it. The day would come when they ruled in fact. Kroan looked forward to that day, whether he'd live to see it or not. Everything he did- everything Veers and his Imperials did- was part of Lord Krayt's design.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The personal bedchamber of Princess Serissa Lohr, heir to the throne of Hapes, was one of the most secure rooms in the entire Fountain Palace. Considering that, it was probably one of the most secure rooms in the entire galaxy. The windows were thick transparisteel. They looked out on a straight cliffside drop into the ocean and barely-visible micro-wires connected to intruder alarms bisected the pane in both directions. The same micro-wires surrounded the door-frame and ran a tight grid beneath the skin of the walls, floor, and ceiling. Infra-red sensors scanned for body heat and motion-traps caught unnecessary movement. The air sensors were calibrated to detect any changes in the oxygen content. Even a slight rise in carbon dioxide when the room was unoccupied would trigger the alarm.

The one flaw in this elaborate set-up was a simple one. When Serissa Lohr entered the chamber the infra-red, motion, and atmospheric sensors all went dormant. To protect to privacy of the princess, Darth Terrid supposed. Life was full of ironies.

Force suggestion was something Terrid had been trained at, first by the Jedi and later by the Sith. It had never been his specialty, but he could do for a small number of people for short intervals. He only had to walk alongside the princess down three winding

corridors before they reached the door, willing her not to see him for what he was. She pressed her palm against the door's scanner to be granted access. As the door slid open, revealing the marble floors, broad thick window, and hand-carved furniture, Serissa said with afterthought, "Thank you, guard. Leave me now."

She stepped through. The door slid shut behind her. Attempting to arrest its slide would trigger another alarm, so Terrid used the Force to speed him through the threshold before the door snapped shut.

The split-second break in concentration was enough to clear the cloud he'd formed around the princess's mind. The girl spun around and her eyes went wide in confusion and shock. She was two long steps away so Terrid used the Force to squeeze her windpipe shut. Her mouth flapped, almost comically, and a hand went to her throat.

Terrid loosened his grip slightly, enough to stop her words while still allowing her to breathe. "You conspired to poison the Queen Mother," he said. "You will be delivered to her and to your death."

Her mouth snapped again and wordless sound creaked out. She'd want to plead for her life, but Terrid wasn't interested in hearing. She could beg her grandmother if she wanted to, not that it would do any good on a woman who'd had her own daughter killed.

"You will sleep now," Terrid said, and began to reach out for the girl's mind.

He was suddenly repelled; a mind forced back his. Surprise loosened his grip. Then, incredibly, pain shot across his cheek as though he'd been slapped.

Anger swallowed surprise. He used the Force to pick the girl off her feet and hurl her onto the bed. He was on top of her in a moment, pinning both her hands with his. He didn't need those to squeeze her throat again with the Force, but as she writhed beneath him she managed to wheeze out, "Please... *Knew* you'd come..."

He could feel that her initial panic had subsided. There was still fear, but mixed with it was a tentative hope, even a bit of triumph.

He realized then that what he'd felt- the mind repelling his, the handless slap- had come from *her*.

That changed everything.

With her body still pinned beneath his he relaxed the grip on her throat enough for her to gulp in necessary breath. He asked, "Do you know what I am?"

The princess took two deep breaths before responding. "You're one of her secret allies. The ones who helped her beat the Jedi."

"What do you know about us?"

"Only rumors, from people who were around when my grandmother overthrew Tenel Ka. I know Jedi were killed, multiple Jedi."

"Jedi aren't invincible. They die like anyone else."

"No. Not like anyone else. It takes someone special to kill a Jedi. And my grandmother, all these years she's been in power... She has a security team but everyone knows she has someone *else* too. You have to be one of them. You're clearly not Hapan."

As she talked on her confidence grew. He asked, "Is this what you planned all along? To draw us out?"

"I was good, wasn't I?" Her eyes gleamed; she even smiled. "I made sure the investigation team wouldn't trace it back to me. She'd have to call in your people. Only they'd be able to find me."

As he stared down at her proud grinning face Terrid didn't know if he should be fascinated or repulsed. She had the haughty arrogance of a born-royal but her actions walked the line between arrogant and reckless. In baiting him this way she'd very clearly risked her life. The girl wasn't stupid; she clearly realized that. The satisfaction welling from her was that of someone who'd gambled everything and, against all odds, come out victorious.

And above all else, she had the Force. Whether she *knew* she had it he couldn't tell. He hadn't sensed it from her since he'd first attacked and she'd defended herself in a panic, which probably meant she wasn't aware of her own power. But she *did* have it: the heir to the Hapan throne was Force-sensitive. She was right to feel triumphant.

He asked again, "What do you think I am? Say it."

She took another breath and said, very seriously, "I think you're a Sith."

"What do you know about the Sith?"

"Like the Jedi, but they're opposite."

Vermin always said that about Sith but they never understood what that meant. Serissa was too young and had spent all her life locked away in a society that had purged itself of apparent Force-users.

"Your grandmother will kill you for this. Why did you seek us out?"

"Can't you guess? You have to kill *her* and make me Queen."

"Why?" He needed to know her reasons.

The girl's face darkened. "She killed my mother. You know that."

Revenge was a start, but there needed to be more. To be Sith was to serve a greater purpose. "Your mother was going to kill her. The queen was defending herself."

"She's ruled for almost thirty years. That's long enough. She's let Hapes rot."

"And what are you planning to do with your hermit kingdom?"

"Rule it *my* way," Serissa hissed. "Cull the nobles. All the schemers like Ducha Reshul and all the ones that *want* to be like her. I can make Hapes *better*."

He could tell she meant it. She wanted revenge for her mother. She raged at the old woman who controlled her life. But she also had a vision for Hapes. "How?" he asked.

"I just told you. Destroy the aristocrats. Give power to people who deserve it. The smartest. The strongest. My grandmother's coddled the nobles and all Hapes has done is stagnate. Even that Jedi was a better queen."

"Would you open the doors and let the rest of the galaxy back inside?"

She waited before respond. He realized she was staring at him, evaluating him like he was evaluating her. Eventually she asked, "Would the Jedi come back? Do they know your kind is here?"

"If they knew they'd have rooted us out by now."

"But they suspect. They have to, after the ones you killed." Terrid granted her a nod. Her face lit brighter. "Then we'll keep them out together. I'll be exactly the kind of ally you need."

Queen Demia had been that for thirty years. Not a perfect ally, to be sure, but one the Sith could work with. This girl was an unknown quality; if she didn't have that untamed, unrecognized Force power he'd hand her over to Demia to be killed right away. As it was, Serissa Lohr had the power to change more than she could possibly realize.

Terrid knew this matter was too great for him. He'd have to refer it to Avanc and Wyyrlok. He already had an idea of what they'd say, but they needed to be consulted first. Only after that could he take this matter to the queen.

Then he remembered something, perhaps the most important piece. "Your grandmother," he said, "Has collected information about us. She's programmed some of her communications arrays to send that information to the Jedi when she dies. Do you know about this?"

That one took her aback. She shook her head and said, "No, but I can find out. I promise."

"Until we find those arrays and disable them your grandmother cannot be killed. Do you understand? If she dies then the Sith go down with her, and you go down with us."

She nodded seriously. "I'll help you any way I can."

She could help them in more ways than she could possibly imagine. He was tempted to probe if she had any idea she was Force-sensitive, but there was nothing to be done about that now. If she was ever to become Sith, that would be a long time from now and there were more immediate concerns.

Without moving from on top of her he released her wrists. She held them over her chest, massaging them, staring up at Terrid without flinching.

"What now?" she asked.

"Now you sleep," Terrid said, and placed a hand on her forehead. She responded on instinct, a slap-back in the Force, but he was ready for it and easily overwhelmed her resistance. Her eyes

fluttered shut. Her head rolled to one side. She looked like a teenage girl at rest, but he knew now that she was anything but.

This was as good a place as any for a long discussion with Darth Avanc. Sitting on the side of the bed, watching the ocean churn under moonlight past the window, he removed the long-range comlink from his pocket and made the hail.

When the Sith finally appeared it was another clear morning. Lenor Chalk had given her report and Demia had decided to linger on the outside walkways, watching the ocean. She'd been getting pensive; the issue with Ducha Reshul had been resolved, and but the greater treason still hung above her, uncertain, waiting to be revealed. Every meal was risking death. Her nerves wouldn't last much longer, so when she turned toward the door and saw the Chiss standing behind her, black robe glaring against the white marble of the balustrade and clear blue sky, her first reaction was relief.

"I was wondering when you would arrive. Have you uncovered the ones who tried to kill me?"

"Yes," the Sith said. Darth Terrid, she recalled.

"And you've brought them to me, alive?"

He gestured to the door to the vestibule, the door Lenor had passed through just ten minutes before. "They are inside."

"I'll want to talk to them first. Make sure they're responsible for everything."

"Of course."

She felt a spike of foreboding when she looked at that door, but there was no point in stalling. "All right. Let me see them."

Terrid went through the door first. Demia followed behind him. A gust brushed through the open doorway, furling his black cloak like a curtain, and when it curled away she could look past the Sith and see revelation.

She barely noticed the young man and woman on their knees. In front of them, a pair of stun-cuffs around her wrist, was her granddaughter. The practiced royal mask melted away and Demia couldn't hide her shock. Fear and defiance warred in Serissa's eyes. She was trembling but she didn't kneel.

Terrid walked a slow circle to come up behind the two kneeling figures. "Security Officer Panal purposely omitted key information from her report to you. She did that on request of Servant Yanar Rolt, who contaminated your food supplies with poisoned items." He stepped in between them and hovered behind Serissa's shoulder. "The poisoning was done on behalf of your granddaughter."

Demia took a step closer. "I have to hear her say it."

The young woman's pretty face twisted in a sneer. "I did it."

"But *why*?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"Your mother... I regret what I had to do but she left me no choice!" The queen felt like she'd stumbled into a nightmare. All this time she'd thought she was raising Serissa into something better than her mother. A wiser ruler, less greedy, less vicious; someone who could carry on her legacy when she was gone.

She'd thought they loved each other.

The weight of failure threatened to pull her to the floor. "I thought I'd made a difference... I thought you were *better* than your mother. I *tried* to make you better, I tried so *hard*."

"Don't apologize," Serissa sniffed. Her voice quaked now, but with fear or anger Demia couldn't tell. "Just kill me like you did my mother. Get it over with."

Demia didn't have the strength to do it again. She'd forced herself to stand in the courtyard and watch as the firing squad had executed Melor. Her life had never been the same after that; any pleasure in ruling had been inevitably poisoned. A second time would kill her as surely as Serissa's poisons.

She realized she was crying. Her old gnarled hands dried her old sagging face. Still hovering behind Serissa, red eyes glowing above the crown of her head like a scarlet halo, Darth Terrid said, "What will we do with the traitors?"

Of course he knew. They all knew and waited for her to make it official. They were torturing her with their eyes.

She blinked wetness away and looked down. "You know what to do."

"Say it," the Sith commanded.

In a weak and hollow voice she said, "The penalty is death."

A humming blade appeared in the Sith's hand: red tinted white. He took two steps back, flicking his wrist as he did so. Two heads rolled in opposite directions and two bodies, already on their knees with hands bound back, tipped forward so the scorched stubs of their necks touched the clean white floor.

Demia looked up. Her granddaughter was still on her feet. Serissa trembled; when she met her grandmother's eyes there was no fear but no regret.

The lightsaber shrunk to nothing and disappeared in the Sith's sleeve. He stepped up to Serissa again, this time hovering behind her left shoulder. He looked at Demia and said, "What will you tell your people about her?"

She hadn't even thought to care. Every Hapan noble knew what Melor had done and the fate she'd been given. Demia had wanted to make an example of the daughter who'd plotted murder and treason. She'd been younger then, stronger and crueler, less sick of ruling.

"I can't do it again," she said aloud.

"Then you'd let her go?"

For a second the option sounded so sweet, so tempting. Not forgiveness, but something else. A banishment, perhaps, as close to amnesty as she could allow. But then she looked into her granddaughter's eyes, defiant in a way they'd always been but she'd never wanted to see. All of this was a tragedy of her own making. If she didn't end what she'd begun she'd be an even more pathetic ruler than she already was.

With effort she shifted her eyes to the Chiss. "You know I can't do that."

"So will you tell your people your granddaughter *also* sought your life? Will you disgrace her too?"

She wagged her head. "I can't."

"Then you'll tell them something else. That she died in an accident."

That would be a small mercy. The others would look at her in sympathy instead of contempt. She might even be able to hide her shame. She'd have to, to keep the illusion.

She sniffed. "Yes. We can tell them that."

"Very well," Terrid said, then reached up to wrap his palm over Serissa's face. The princess opened her mouth to scream but before sound could come, blue lightning jumped out from the Chiss's hand. It ran up and down her like an electric current. Her whole body shook and her half-covered face contorted in a soundless scream.

It lasted for only a few seconds but Serissa's death seemed to take forever. Demia's mind fell back thirty years to the moment she'd watched Darth Xoran scald that Jedi woman until her skin curled clear and muscle charred against visible bone. The Falleen had drawn out the agony as long as possible, savoring it like a true sadist. Before that moment Demia had never truly understood what the Sith were and what they could do. Only when they'd been joined together for the rest of her life had she realized.

Darth Terrid was merciful in comparison. When the lightning stopped he pulled his hand away. Serissa dropped on the floor between them. The Chiss stood over the princess, looking at Demia and wordlessly asking if she were satisfied. The old queen's trembles were too much. Her legs gave out beneath her and she fell to the floor, more softly than expected. She bent over Serissa's body and reached out cautiously, afraid some lightning might jump to her fingers, but nothing came. She pulled black hair free from her granddaughter's face. It was smooth, pretty, almost peaceful. Like the child she'd been. Corruption had taken her before she'd ever had a chance. That was the fate of those born princess of Hapes. Demia understood that now; it should have been obvious all along.

If she'd known triumph would cost her this much she would have let that damned Jedi witch keep the Hapan throne. The price was too high, too high.

With a hint of softness, maybe even sympathy, the Sith said, "I will take the body."

"What?" Blinking, she looked up at that hood-shadowed face, those glowing inhuman eyes.

He picked bent low and picked Serissa up in both arms. Without waiting for Demia he started for the door. The old woman pushed herself off the marble, knees aching and arms trembling, and staggered onto the balcony just in time to see Darth Terrid lift Serissa's body over the balustrade and let go.

Demia wasn't fast enough to see it hit the water. When she came up beside Terrid and looked down there was only rock plunging into water and the white crash of waves.

"Wait an hour, maybe two," the Sith said. "Then send searchers for her body. It will be easy to claim she drowned. An accident, like you wanted."

He was right. It was the easiest way. She remembered the other two bodies in the room behind them, heads cleaved off by lightsabers, but those would be easy to dispose of. They had been nothing people anyway.

Serissa was different. Just an hour ago she'd been a queen's pride and promise; now she was an open wound that would bleed Demia to death, sooner or later.

This Chiss stayed where he was beside her, unmoving. When Demia steadied herself she looked him in the eyes and asked, "Well? Are you expecting me to thank you?"

After a moment he said, "No. Just remember, we've held up our side of the agreement."

"I won't forget this."

He took her every meaning with a nod. He stepped for the door. It slid open, revealing the remaining bodies. He glanced over his shoulder and said, "I will leave the rest to you." Then he stepped through, the door closed, and he was gone.

Demia bent against the railing, hands on cold marble. She didn't have to strength to stand on her own. She stared down the long drop into the ocean, the waves and eternal water that had always given her comfort. Now even those were ruined for her.

Even as she hated that place she stayed there for a long time. She didn't want to go back into the palace. She didn't feel like a queen any longer, just an old woman, more alone than ever.

The nova cruisers and flight control stations over Hapes were designed to intercept any unwanted visitor to the throneworld, but even they were unable to spot the single small spacecraft, black as space and shaped like a flying wing, as it soared clear of the Fountain Palace, pierced through the clouds, climbed out of orbit, and finally began its course through the Hapes Cluster's winding hyperspace lanes back to Shedu Maad.

To Darth Terrid it was a strange experience. Seventeen years ago this same vessel had carried a Jedi apprentice named Ran'wharn'csapla to the secret Sith world. Like Serissa Lohr, that boy had had no idea of the horror and power that awaited him there.

It had all gone easier than expected. A show of lighting and temporary Force-induced stoppage of the princess' breathing had been enough to convince the old queen that her granddaughter was dead. As planned, Darth Kheykid had been waiting in the cliffs beneath the palace to catch her body before it fell into the violent waves. By the time Terrid had found his way back to the hidden hangar where *Intruder* had docked, the young woman had already been strapped down inside the ship's cockpit and the Barabel Sith Lord waiting outside, long-toothed and slit-eyed reptilian face as fearsome as it had been all those years ago, when he'd been the prisoner and Kheykid his captor.

Though Darth Avanc had been the one to forge Ran'wharn'csapla into Darth Terrid, the Chiss still looked on Kheykid as the one who'd ushered him onto the path of the dark side. A hundred-fifty kilos but still lightning-fast, armed with natural teeth and claws in addition to twin short-blade lightsabers, Kheykid was the One Sith's most fearsome living weapon. Even now Terrid felt disconcerted to be with him in *Intruder's* cockpit.

When they entered hyperspace, Terrid pushed out of his seat and looked to the back of the cockpit. The Hapan princess was

stirring at last. She pushed herself upright on the couch and blinked her eyes; they settled on Terrid first, then Kheykid. A spike of fear shot out of her but she stifled it, on her face and in the Force. She indeed had a natural, unconscious talent, but it would take a lot of punishment to forge her into a Sith.

He didn't bother to ask how she felt. Even the short burst of lighting he'd given her would send after-shocks of pain through her system for hours. That was fine; to be a Sith was to use pain as a tool. She had better start learning now.

The first thing Serissa asked was, "Does she think I'm dead?"

"I made sure of it," Avanc said.

She shifted in her seat and her eyes lingered on Kheykid. "Am I going to get introductions?"

"Darth Kheykid," the Barabel said simply.

"And we're going to your planet now, aren't we? Shedu Maad?"

"That's right," said Terrid.

She held her hands up, examining them like they were something new. "You really think I have your Force."

"You do," Terrid said. "But it will take much training for you to become a Sith."

"I want to become Queen of Hapes," she said, haughty and regal despite her circumstances.

"You will become a Sith first. Or you will die."

Her eyes narrowed. "I already gave you what you wanted. A list of the transmission centers where my grandmother keeps her message for the Jedi. She might change locations or add another array. You should kill her now before she has the chance. It's the safest thing."

"She is impatient," Kheykid hissed disapproval.

"She's young," said Terrid.

"I'm not a child," she glared.

Terrid believed her. "You are not a princess anymore. Do you understand? The princess is *dead*. You may be queen one day but you are a Sith apprentice now."

She looked at her hands again. "You said the Force can give me power to remake things the way I want them to be."

"With the Dark Side you can bend everything to your will," said Kheykid. "But only if you truly embrace it."

When she looked back at the Barabel she said, hard and determined at last, "Then I'll do it. Teach me to be a Sith. I'm not afraid."

But she was. He could feel that: frightened and resigned and resolved all at once, and above all hungry to be more than what she was. Not a child, not an adult, burning with an inner need: she reminded him of himself as he'd been when Kheykid had ended his first life and begun a new one.

Until that moment his mission on Hapes had been a bothersome duty, reluctantly fulfilled. Now he understood the Force had been with him all this time. It was putting an opportunity before him and he'd be a poor Sith not to take it. He'd have to argue to get his way from Avanc and Wyyrlok, of course, but he'd done that before.

In the years since he'd been introduced to the dark side- not by Kheykid or Avanc but ultimately by Darth Xoran herself on Varadan- he had always been a student. Now it was time to be a teacher.

CHAPTER NINE

Before he'd passed into the Force, Jade's grandfather had told her a lot about the world where he'd grown up. Luke Skywalker had said that his younger self had felt trapped on his uncle's moisture farm and longed for greatness far beyond. The greatness he'd gotten, often at high price, but he said that sometimes he found himself looking back at his restless youth on Tatooine with nostalgia. At least then he'd been innocent.

Jade had been through too much to be innocent, but her life on Fengrine reminded her a lot of her grandfather's stories of Tatooine. She and Jodram worked crops on their small plot of land just as young Luke Skywalker had gathered moisture on his. Their home was even more simple than what he'd grown up with. There was no utility garage to park their landspeeder, only a wood-walled shed. The house was a single building, two stories, with just enough space for two adults and two children not to get on each other's nerves. The household's equipment was rudimentary in other respects; it lacked, for example, a long-ranged transmitter than connected to the HoloNet. Most of the homesteads on Fengrine had similarly modest equipment and Jade hadn't wanted to put her family in a position of visible superiority over the other people on this planet. It was for that same reason than she'd refused the planetary

governor's offer to provide a home. To earn the trust of normal beings Jedi had to live like them, with them, and this meant that when Jade and Jodram weren't settling disputes in Unity and Justice trials they lived like farmers. Like her grandfather, a long time ago.

She'd taken to it surprisingly well, and so had Jodram, but sometimes the inconveniences grated. When someone needed to talk to her an alert was routed to their short-range comm beacon at their homestead, and from there Jade had to ride the speeder into the nearest major settlement and use its interstellar transmitter.

The town was the second-largest one on Fengrine and the most populous on its southern hemisphere. It was much tamer than Mos Eisley back on Tatooine; its sprawling spaceport facilities mostly hosted unarmed and light-crewed cargo ships that touched down to fill their kilometer-long holds with grain and foodstuffs. Jade knew one of those was scheduled to come in today, but she saw no sign of it as she maneuvered her landspeeder to the communications center. Its transmission dish rose on a tower at the spaceport's edge like a beacon, visible from well outside the town.

The staff at the comm station treated her with deference as they led her to a console and private booth. When she sent out her response to the hailing signal she had to wait for almost five minutes before the connection went through; apparently she'd caught her cousin at a bad time.

When Allana's holo-image appeared before her, the older woman was beaming a calm smile. "It's good to see you again, Jade. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Not at all," she said. Rebuilding Senex-Juvex into a working member of the Alliance had been the primary challenge of Allana's term as Chief of State. After stepping down from that position and into her new hybrid role as a bridge between the Alliance and the Jedi Order she was still Jade's main contact to the galaxy outside Fengrine.

"I heard about your latest arbitration," Allana began. "Fengrine's governor called me to express his appreciation."

"I'm glad." Jade knew she hadn't called just for that but decided to keep the small talk up just a little. "Are you still on Coruscant?"

"For now, yes, but I'll be heading back to Ossus soon." Allana's expression grew serious. "I don't want to be too alarming, but your presence might be required there too."

She'd been expecting something like that. "Does this have to do with those raiders chopping up Imperial space?"

"That's right. What have you heard?"

"That some Jedi helped the Imperials stop the latest convoy attacks. I heard Davek planned it that way."

"He did. Arlen and Marasiah were there." After a short hesitation she added, "Arlen was injured, but he's all right now."

Jade fought a wince. Her simple life on Fengrine, part-time farmer and part-time judge, had allowed her a peace of mind she'd never had before, but it still took her away from the people she cared about. Arlen had helped train her as a Jedi, both before and after her father's death. She'd always believed she'd feel it in the Force if he were killed, but when he'd been injured she hadn't sensed a thing.

Jade tried to put her mind on the future. "Did the Imperials request more Jedi help after that?"

Allana shook her head. "They're *Imperials*, Jade. Very prideful. They haven't requested help from the Alliance either. Jaina thinks they'll use the Jedi based on Bastion as much as they can and leave it at that."

"Then what will you need me for? Or is it *us*?"

"That's what I wanted you to think about. Grand Master Lowbacca knows that it's important for the Jedi to keep a presence in Senex-Juvex. He hasn't decided whether to recall Jedi for an operation, but if he does, he wants either you or Jodram to be a part of it. Which of you goes is something we've agreed to leave to you."

"But what would we *do* exactly?"

"There's some indication these attacks are being commanded by a pair of beings- a king and queen, supposedly- somewhere in the Unknown Regions. If this turns into a large-scale invasion, a war-

"The Jedi will go into uncharted space and investigate. Since there's no law or government in those systems we won't have to act on invitation like we would in Imperial or Alliance space."

"You have a knack for politics."

"No, just a grasp of reality." She sighed. "So you want one of us to sign up for an unknown mission in unknown space... while the other one sits here and takes care of the kids?"

"They're *both* important jobs."

"I know. When do you want an answer from us?"

"There's no timeline yet. We might not even request you at all. Davek's putting together a battle plan that's supposed to blunt these attacks. Right now you and Jodram need to think about it. That's all."

"All right. We will. Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment, but I'll call again either way." A little smile creased Allana's lips. "If I were you, I'd invest in a long-range transmitter for your house."

"None of the farmers on Fengrine own one. They all use the central facility. We're not in the Core, you know."

"I know. It would be convenient, that's all."

Jade shook her head. "I remember something Grandpa Luke told me once. He wanted there to be a 'Jedi on every streetcorner.' Jedi interacting with normal beings all over the galaxy, living like them. That's what I'm trying to do."

"I think he'd be proud of you, in more ways than one."

Jade looked askance; she'd never been good with flattery. "Thanks."

Allana snorted amusement. "I'll talk to you again, Jade."

"Understood. May the Force be with you."

When the signal ended Jade released another sigh and left the comm station. She wasn't looking forward to tonight's conversation. Jodram, she knew, would insist on going himself. Nat would ask questions that demanded too many answers and Kol would sit in his high-bottom chair, watching the rest of his family with wide-open eyes and that took in everything and, Jade sometimes suspected, understood them better than a three-year-old had any right to.

As she walked across the yard toward her speeder she heard a roaring in the sky, the signal of that cargo ship coming in to land.

She didn't look up into she realized that roar had a higher pitch than it was supposed to; the roar became a stutter and she arched her head back to see a clear blue sky. She looked around and saw other people staring up too, alarmed and confused. A few were pointing and followed their stabbed fingers. A ship was approaching from a distance, coming in over the sprawling farmlands around the settlement at a faster speed than it should have. It was still far off, still small, but she could see the corona of its engine-flares flickering madly. When she saw a tongue of flame lash out from one engine, she sprinted for the spaceport control tower not far from the transmission station.

She normally hated using Force suggestion on innocent beings, but in this case she needed to get through the secured zone as fast as she could. By the time she got to the traffic control center the staff was all bleeding tension in the Force. The first thing she heard as she stepped through the door was someone say, "Altitude's at twenty-eight hundred meters and dropping fast."

"Deceleration?" another voice asked.

"Negative."

"They can't land at their speed," scowled an older human who looked to be the flight control chief from the pips on his collar. "Hail them! Tell them to break off!"

"No response, sir. They're coming in hot."

"They'll tear through the whole town!"

Jade scampered across the platform toward the observation tower's broad viewports, and only then did her presence register with the panicked staff.

"Miss!" the control chief called. "What the hells do you think you're-"

Someone else grabbed him hard by the arm. "Sir, it's *her*!"

She barely heard them. She stood with both palms pressed against the cold glass, looking out at the sprawl of the settlement, the broad blue sky, and the growing shape of the freighter as it approached, trailing flames.

She took less than a second to burn the sight into her mind. Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let herself sink into the Force.

It was a paradox that had been so hard for her growing up. When you drew on the Force you used it to enact your will, but to successfully do it you had to *surrender* your will and let yourself dissolve into the immensity that was the galaxy's invisible unifying power. Letting go without losing your purpose was hard enough, but once she'd finally learned to do that the worst part had come. In letting go she'd let herself fall into something that was vast and great and powerful beyond comprehension and it had felt like she was being swallowed by agony. To touch the Force had been to touch her earliest memory of it: the horrible death of her mother at the hands of Darth Xoran. Every time she'd used the Force she'd felt some of that pain, and the more she'd used the greater the pain.

That was a long time ago, barely a memory. Now she fell without thought, without effort. She let herself be subsumed into the great invisible power that resonated with the final moments of her father. As Ben Skywalker's life had dissolved into the Force he'd left her warmth and strength and a love that would never pass away, and this was the power she drew from without hesitation.

She surrendered to the power and the power surrendered to her and they joined together like a tide to swell beneath the crashing ship. They caught it, slowed it. Its great careening speed and massive bulk was almost too much; as she stood before the glass, eyes still closed, her breathing grew fast, sweat dampened her face, and her hands began to tremble.

She didn't release or give in. She didn't worry, she didn't think. She made herself into a conduit for the great river of power that held the cargo ship over the town, then lowered it onto the long stretch of the landing platform. It was not a soft impact; as the great spacecraft's belly careened into the paved permacrete stretch, the impact sheared off metal plating and sent out sprays of friction-sparks. The heavy craft rebounded from impact, bounced up, and smashed down a second time. That collision was enough to knock its power generator out of alignment. The out-of-control engines

finally died. The hauler screamed across the landing zone to its very edge, where the nose of its cockpit control section impacted against the spaceport's high barrier walls with a mild crunch.

Then it was over. Jade's eyes opened. Strength left her body and she crumpled to the floor. Panting hard, she tried to grab the glass for purchase but it slipped away from her; palms left long streaks of sweat as she fell.

She was surrounded by people but all she could make out was a forest of trouser-legs. Finally the gruff and gray-haired control chief squatted in front of her and put a hand against her face. His fingers were icy cold against her cheek; she savored the touch.

"Master Jedi-" he said, then froze. He didn't know what to say.

Someone behind him reported, "Emergency team on the tarmac now."

"Comm line established," someone else called. "The team reports minor injuries only, sir."

The controller's face relaxed into a relieved smile. "Thank you, Master Jedi. That was... That was *amazing*. I don't know how many lives you just saved."

The river inside her was dwindling down to a trickle. Her breathing stabilized and the shaking stopped. All that was left was an exhaustion greater than any toll physical exertion could take.

She found the power to reach up and cup the hand on her cheek, then smiled back. "Just doing my job," she said.

By the time Jade got back to their home Jodram had already heard. When she'd stepped through the door she'd still looked faint from the exertion but she'd smiled and told him not to worry, surely knowing she couldn't stop him from doing just that.

"I didn't even think as I did it," she told him later that night, after dinner, after they'd finally put both sons to bed. "I just *let* it happen."

"I heard that ship burst its engine on some space debris coming through orbit. If it *had* crashed down in the middle of town-"

"It didn't."

"Because you *didn't* let it happen."

She sighed and leaned against him. Their bedroom on the second storey of the house was dark except for the glow of their bedstand lamp. "Sometimes you just *know* what to do. The Force moves you and you move in the Force."

He knew what she meant. The philosophy of surrender to the Force, and by surrender using it, was at the core of what all Jedi were taught. He'd experienced moments like that too, where he felt like he got just a little bit closer to the unifying oneness at the heart of the universe, but he knew, without a doubt, that he'd never have been able to do what his wife had this afternoon.

The reason was obvious. Some beings had an innately stronger connection with the Force than others. Jodram's father Doran was a Jedi; his aunt Jesmin had trained for a little while, then washed out because as hard as she tried she simply wasn't strong enough. Jodram was strong enough to be a knight like his father, but his raw abilities would never match Jade's. To be a Skywalker was to inherit a natural power few Jedi could comprehend.

Sometimes that power frightened him. He didn't know what it would mean for his sons. Jade's father and grandfather had lost and suffered deeply even as they built the Jedi Order into the thousand-strong organization it was today. Both her parents had died fighting Sith. Jade was gentle by temperament; she always had been and it was what had attracted him since they were teenage apprentices together. Perhaps because of what it had cost her family already, she showed no ambition to lead the Jedi Order. What she wanted was what Jodram wanted: to lead a simple life, raise their sons, and be a Jedi all the while. But sometimes, after getting unexpected reminders of just what a Skywalker could do, he wondered how long the Force would really let her remain what she was now.

"There's something else," she said out of nowhere.

Her tone was serious and he stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I was in town to take a call from Allana."

"Oh, that's right." He'd forgotten amidst all this.

"She was relaying a request from Lowbacca. If the Jedi decide to mobilize and send people into the Unknown Regions, he'll want one of us to go."

"One of us?" he frowned.

"Our choice, she said." In the low light her green eyes looked big and deep. "It's important to keep one Jedi here, doing what we're supposed to be doing. And let's be honest, Fengrine doesn't need two arbiters anymore."

"I was thinking more about Nat and Kol."

"I know." She found his hand atop the bedsheets and squeezed it. "And I know what you're thinking."

Of course she would. "We don't know what's going on in the Unknown Regions. It's going to be dangerous no matter what. The boys..."

"They'll need us both."

He wanted to tell her, *they'll need a Skywalker*. He found himself aching to go, not least because the thought of raising the boys without her was too awful to bear.

"This is all hypothetical," she said. "We shouldn't try and decide right away."

"You're right. We should sleep on it."

"For a night or two." She said softly and squeezed his hand again. "To be honest, I'm still a little tired."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine by morning. Don't worry about me. Today was just a little hectic."

Understatement was another thing Jade was good at. When they turned out the light and lay down together he rolled onto his side and watched her stir slightly, then go still. She fell asleep quickly, like she deserved to. Jodram spent a long time watching the slow rise of her chest and the curves of her face, faint in the moonlight drifting through their window. It took a long time to clear his mind and surrender to sleep, but eventually he did.

Growing up Allana had spent as much time aboard the *Millennium Falcon* as she had in the Fountain Palace. Her grandfather's old tramp freighter had been about as far away from royal splendor as possible, and she liked to think the clashing settings had made her pragmatic and adaptable. As an Alliance Senator she'd mostly

traveled from system to system in an elegant emerald-hulled Hapan shuttle. As Chief of State she'd used a variety of official craft depending on the situation, all of them on the high end up upscale. Now that she'd settled into her Jedi-ambassador role she did more traveling than ever, and she was back to the Hapan ship she'd used as senator.

It was somewhat appropriate, then, that she spent the long hyperspace ride from Coruscant to Ossus reviewing the latest bits of news to have trickled out of the closed-off Consortium. As Allana was busy with her other duties, the intelligence-gathering operation was managed by Tanith Zel. Tall and red-haired like her late mother Taryn, she spent most of her time on the colony the Hapan exiles had been granted in Mid-Rim, but she'd stopped by Coruscant to personally deliver the latest report to Allana and was now riding out with her to the Jedi world.

The younger woman sat patiently in the shuttle's crew lounge and waited for Allana to finish reading the report. When she was done Allana put the datapad in her lap and asked, "Are you sure we can't get any more details on this?"

Tanith crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't think there are any more details to get. Our sources are close. They've gotten the best information anyone could."

Tanith had been managing their spies inside the Cluster for years and Allana no longer knew the specific names or positions of any of them. That was the best for operational security, but right now it left her in the dark and she didn't like it. "How old was Serissa Lohr?"

"Seventeen."

That was too young to die, no matter who your grandmother was. "And how was she when Melor, ah, died?"

"She was seven years old when her mother was executed, so she was essentially raised by her grandmother."

Allana restrained a frown. Tanith had been about the same age during the Sith-led coup on Hapes that had claimed her parent's lives. Jade Skywalker had been five. Losing parents early had hurt both girls deeply; in some ways Serissa Lohr must have hurt even

worse, because she was raised by the one who'd ordered her mother killed.

"I suppose it could have been an accident," Allana said. "Or a suicide. Or something else."

"When she executed her daughter, the queen made a show of it," Tanith said. "This is very different. From our last report they still haven't found the princess' body."

"But they're sure she fell into the ocean."

"The reports *suggest* that. But it's all very unclear."

"I'm sure the rumor mill in the court's more active than ever." Allana sighed. "These reports say the queen's been in seclusion. Is she planning to have some kind of funeral? A memorial ceremony if they don't find the body?"

"Our sources have no idea. It sounds like *nobody*, not even the courtiers, know."

"Which lets more and more rumors spread."

"Exactly. All we can say for sure is that Princess Serissa is gone."

Allana tapped the edges of the datapad. "Do you think this could be part of some kind of plot? The queen has no successor now. If she's gone there will be a power struggle. It could get very nasty unless someone's already jockeyed to take over."

"If she's smart she'll name a successor fast, just to keep the knives out of her back," Tanith said. "And whatever else she is, Demia Lohr *is* smart."

A question was pregnant between them, so Allana decided to say it aloud. "If the queen dies without a successor, what do you think we should do?"

Tanith was usually quick to give her opinion. Now she hesitated, which meant she wasn't sure of the right answer.

"It's been almost thirty years," she said eventually. "A whole generation is growing up on New Hapes that never saw the homeworld at all."

"But they still want to go there some day."

Tanith, who could barely remember Hapes herself, nodded firmly. "Parents pass beliefs to their children. If anything the

younger people are the most convinced that someday we should take back what was stolen from us."

"Do you think there'd be opportunity in a succession struggle?"

"In theory. If a Ducha comes out on top who favors letting the Exiles back in, letting you and your mother and the *Jedi* in, then yes, it's possible."

Allana smiled bitterly. "But not very."

"No. The queen purged your family's allies very effectively."

Not so effectively they didn't have intel sources, but spying was very different from statecraft. "Given the people we have on the ground now, how much do you think we could effect things, if it came to a succession struggle?"

"That's a hard question. I'd have to think about it. Maybe get in contact with our people inside the Consortium."

"I understand. There's no rush, but I'd like to have some idea."

"Of course." Tanith paused, then asked, "If Jedi teams go into the Unknown Regions, do you plan on joining them?"

The change in topic was sudden, but not unexpected. "If Grand Master Lowbacca asks me to, I will."

"But do you think it's *likely*?"

"I think it's definitely possible."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Allana leaned forward. "You've been putting more effort than anyone into keeping track of things on Hapes. If an important decision needs to be made, and my mother and I aren't immediately available, you should be ready to take it yourself."

She blinked. "You're still Princess of Hapes and your mother is still Queen."

Allana didn't know when she'd stopped believing in that, but it had been a while ago. Tanith, though, spoke with full conviction. Allana had lived on Hapes long enough to know its many ugly sides and felt some of the loneliness and alienation that had driven her mother into a hidden affair with her father in the first place. For Tanith Hapes was an ideal and a goal, given just enough definition by childhood memory to seem attainable.

If the day ever came when the Exiles could go back to Hapes, Allana and her mother wouldn't lead the return. Tanith and her generation would, and after spending all their lives in the Alliance they'd bring back new and foreign ideas that would change the Consortium's ossified aristocracy forever. Allana wanted that day to come, not for herself but for Tanith and all the Hapans living under a murderous queen propped up by Sith.

She said, "I'm not as young as I used to be. My mother certainly isn't, and we both have other responsibilities besides."

"I don't want to take away your authority."

"You already have, but that's a good thing. You need to be ready to take more of it." She gave Tanith a little smile. "I think you'll handle it just fine."

Tanith looked away, embarrassed. It was a rare expression on her and it faded quickly into determination.

That was good, Allana thought. Whatever happened on Hapes would happen; she'd long ago resigned herself to having little effect there. What needed her attention now was uncharted space. There were mysteries and dangers hidden there to which Hapes could never to compare.

CHAPTER TEN

The moment the Imperial attack fleet reverted to realspace and the tactical reports started coming in, Davek Fel knew something was off. Since getting the intelligence from the Chiss pointing to major marshaling points for the raiders, they'd sent several TIE Stalker sorties on reconnaissance sweeps. The stealth ships had confirmed the raiders were massing in the expected areas and had taken readings of the ships present. Though most of them were of unfamiliar type, the sorties had at least provided a basic idea of what threats they'd be facing.

The TIE Stalkers had never lingered long; there was no telling how perceptive the sensors on these unfamiliar raiders ships might be. The last recon flight to this gathering point had come just three hours before Davek took his fleet over the border, and in that time something had clearly changed.

"How many ships are we seeing here?" Davek asked the tactical lieutenant aboard his flagship, the eight-kilometer-long *Legator*-class star destroyer *Afsheen Makati*.

"Our count is.... Thirty-eight, sir."

Davek fought a frown. The last recon flight had reported over eighty ships. They'd brought more than enough to take on the ships

present but the other must have gone somewhere else. That he had no idea where was immediately worrying.

But they were here, and the raider fleet- a miss-matched assemblage of Tylonian, Pal'shoran, Vagaari, and more- were breaking their already loose formation to hurl themselves at the newly-arrived Imperial fleet.

Whatever kind of fight this was, it was on.

"Tell all ships to begin Attack Pattern Cresh. Move to encircle. Tell our interditors to get their gravity wells online, full strength."

The comm officer reported, "Sir, they're throwing up a jamming field. Heavy-duty, blocking all our holo-signals."

He looked back to Tactical. "Can you pinpoint the source?"

"Working on it, sir."

"Comm, can we get a line with the other ships?"

"No holo-signals. Looks like we can still send data packages on tight-beams."

Text-based messages were better than nothing. "Do it. My orders still stand. Tactical, find out where the jamming is coming from. Comm, what about long-range transmissions?"

"All blocked, sir."

The situation reeked of a trap. Maybe the raiders had spotted the TIE Stalkers; maybe they'd intercepted transmissions. The deck shuddered slightly and he felt relief; the interditors had brought up their gravity wells, preventing hyperspace travel anywhere near the battle zone. If the enemy wanted to launch an encircling ambush they'd be wrenched out of lightspeed well clear of the Imperial fleet.

But if they'd been plotting a trap, they would have known he'd bring interditors with him. Nothing here added up, unless they wanted to trap him here while the rest of the fleet took action elsewhere.

Davek fought a swear and asked Tactical, "Have we pinned down the source of the jamming yet?"

"I... think so, sir."

"Out with it."

"There's a large Pal'shoran ship at the rear of their line. It looks to be the source."

Davek glanced at the tactical holo, where a red circle now marked a large red marker. The first Imperial gunships and frigates were beginning to engage the enemy; swarms of Tylonian drone fighters and fast Vagaari attack ships were throwing themselves at the encircling Imperial line without slowing down.

"Launch our fist interceptor wing," Davek said. "Then give the Jedi squadrons clearance. Tell them to target that Pal'shoran ship and destroy it."

Arlen Fel would have much rather been behind the helm of his personal ship, the *Starlight Champion*. TIE fighters had never been his style, not even the new TIE Sabers his sister-in-law had insisted the Jedi acquire. Marasiah's squadron launched first from *Makati's* hangar and soared toward the flecks of explosions marking the beginning of the fight.

They'd gotten instructions from Davek: destroy the ship putting up the jamming field. Arlen was all too eager to comply; right now he couldn't even speak to his other pilots on their comm line. The Jedi pilots had to rely on the Force to communicate and guide each other, which was hard enough in a combat situation, especially when you were behind the stick of a half-familiar starfighter.

The first part was easy. They did just as ordered, punching toward the initial wave of swarming Tylonian drone ships and through it. Davek had been quite clear: their goal was to get to that jamming source and destroy it and stop at nothing along the way. TIE Sabers were fast, almost as swift as the TIE-Xs now tangling with the drones, with much better shields. Flak and stray laser blasts buffeted Arlen's ship without breaking it as he plunged past the first wave. Marasiah's squad was up front; they dodged and weaved around enemy ships with impressive agility, blowing up a few drones as they kept their straight vector toward the jamming ship. Arlen could, just barely, feel Marasiah's controlled intent through the Force-meld that joined all two dozen Jedi pilots.

One advantage to having enemies that barely coordinated their attacks was that they didn't coordinate defense either. Two dozen TIE Sabers should have caused the raiders to scramble a better

response, but instead Marasiah's squad blew through a cluster of unfamiliar starfighters and kept going. Arlen's squad flew in right though the gap. A few more of those ships gave chase, and Arlen sent a thought through the Force-meld, telling the rear pilots to break off and deal with them while the rest kept the charge. To his relief and slight surprise, his pilots got the message and did exactly as ordered.

His scanners, at least, still read clearly. The Pal'shoran jamming vessel was coming up now. Arlen kicked his fighter forward, Deir Sinde and Rekkon Sholz staying close behind either wing.

He felt an instruction from Marasiah ripple through the Force, too vague to comprehend, but then he saw that it hadn't been meant for him at all. Her squadron formed a tight formation that charged straight at the Pal'shoran ship and opened fire. Arlen told his pilots to do the same as double-torpedo volleys impacted on the ship's shields. Marasiah's pilots scattered, drawing anti-fighter turret fire away from the second set of attackers.

Arlen's squad aimed right for where the shields were already weakened. As he peeled away, drawing turret fire of his own, he spotted his twin torpedoes impact on the shuddering forward shields. As he wheeled around he felt an urge of elation that meant someone else's must have gone through.

That sensation was the signal Marasiah had been waiting for. Her pilots had already re-formed on the rear of the Pal'shoran ship and were launching their second attack wave, this one taking its aft shields. Explosions burst through the engine section and the remaining thrusters flickered before going dark.

Marasiah kept calling for attack in the Force. Arlen swung his fighter around and saw that others from his squad were already taking whatever shots they could get. He popped off two more torpedoes and saw them tear fiery holes in the ship's midsection before pulling away.

All of a sudden his comm board lit up. He flicked it on, got a burst of static in his ear, then heard Davek say, "Jedi pilots, the jamming field is down. Repeat, the field is *down*. Form back and—"

Davek's voice turned into an electric scream and for a second Arlen thought his brother was under attack. Then he checked his comm line and saw that *another* jamming field had been thrown up.

"They're gonna make us do this all day," he muttered to himself.

Another light on his console came on: a text-based message, tight-beamed to his ship. He pulled himself clear of the battle zone and tapped the button to bring the message onto the heads-up-display built into his helmet.

Will drop drag field thirty seconds. Take flight. Get out and contact others. Suspect attack somewhere.

Gravity wells couldn't be taken down and thrown up easily; the fastest shut-down start-up procedure would drain power from all other systems on an interdicator cruiser and still take close to ten minutes. In that time the Imperial fleet would be vulnerable to attackers dropping out of hyperspace.

If Davek was going through all that much trouble and taking the risk, he must have been really worried. When they'd arrived to find a smaller fleet than expected Arlen's first thought had been relief; but then, he was just a Jedi. His brother was the admiral.

The clock was already counting down. Arlen sent a message to Sinde and Sholz in the Force, not just telling but *ordering* them to fall in. Their two fighters peeled away from the crippled Pal'shoran ship and he checked his scanners. Tight-beam transmissions, non-holo and non-audio, seemed to be possible, so he tapped out an order on his console, linking his navcomputer with theirs.

When the interdiction field went down Arlen sent two signals in the Force, simple enough to be clear.

To his Jedi wingmen he sent: *On my mark.*

To Marasiah he sent: *I have to go.*

Her response was understanding. Davek had almost certainly sent her a message too.

Arlen's navcomputer reported a course plotted that would take them well clear of the battle zone. From there he could fall back to Imperial space and call for help, or information, or whatever it was Davek needed to know.

Whatever it was, he figured he'd know when he found it. He sent the signal to his two pilots, then pulled the throttle and threw himself into hyperspace.

As best as Jagged could remember, he hadn't been on Valc VII in almost fifty years. He'd been so young then, though he hadn't felt it at the time, burdened as he'd been by the task of trying to hold the Imperial Remnant together after the Jedi had unceremoniously dumped him into a Head of State position. At the time it had felt like being thrown into a tank full of hungry predator fish, each fish an admiral or a moff who resented everything Jag stood for.

Things had, thankfully, changed. Moff Keel Moran was a very different breed from the moffs of yesterday, or for that matter from moffs like Corrien Veers or Homan Thane. Moran- about half Jag's age, with black hair and a mildly plump build- had been elected governor of a sector that had bordered the Unknown Regions and had both the second-lowest population and highest percentage of non-humans in Imperial space. He was in all things a pragmatist, and as a man who'd grown up on Valc VII he was a patriot as well, with a visible loyalty to his homeworld and its citizens, regardless of species. Jag understood why; planets like Bastion and Entralla were feeling more and more like Coruscant by the day, but Valc VII seemed to have found a comfortable compromise between nature and urbanism. When viewed from low orbit one could clearly make out the cities but they were mere gray gnarls in the overall wash of browns, greens, and blues on the surface.

Moff Moran was still a politician, which meant his meeting with Jag still had the circuitous formality and aversions expected of official meetings. Moran had greeted Jag with a sumptuous meal, then shown him around the governor's mansion and a few sights in the capital city, all the while toeing around the tricky issue Jag had come here to discuss. Years ago Jag would have felt irritated or impatient, but at his age he knew that in some things, at least, it was better not to rush.

On the second day he joined Moran on an excursion to one of the three Golan IV defense stations located above the planet. The

change in mood from civilian to military was stark; as Moran let him tour the weapons station, which boasted twice the mass and three times the armament of a *Predator*-class star destroyer, he noticed the quiet tension beneath the crew's behavior. They all knew, intellectually, that the raiders were nowhere near Valc VII, but it didn't stop them from worrying.

By the time the walk-through was done Jag was ready to get off his feet. He'd never conceded the need to use a cane or walking implement and after so much walking he'd started to regret the fact. He and Moran settled into a small conference room with one broad transparisteel wall looking out across the black curve of the planet's nighttime surface, cities lit up like dense star clusters beneath them. He could see, too, the grey wedge of one of the three patrolling star destroyers in the far distance.

After an aide dropped off a tray with two simple water glasses, Moran dismissed her, leaving the two of them alone at last. Finally, the time had come to get down to business.

Jag took a sip of water, very cool, and said, "Thank you for hosting me, and giving the tours. I don't see as much of the Empire as I used to."

"I just wanted you to understand what kind of world this is."

Jag raised a white brow. "How do you mean?"

Moran spread his hands. "I've showed you its sides. Military and civilian. Human and nonhuman. We have a great mix of it all here, more than anywhere else in this sector.

"Your goal is to protect that. Not just professionally, but personally."

"You're here to advise me on how to do that, aren't you?"

"In part. But I'm not *just* here to talk about Valc VII."

Moran took a sip of water and leaned back in his chair. He thought a moment and said, "People here are proud our world is what it is. And we're proud to be part of an Empire that lets us be what we are."

"All I've ever wanted is to build that kind of Empire. You know that."

"I know, and I'm grateful, sir."

Jag waved a hand. "Please, no *sir*. I've got no rank and it makes me feel old."

"All right. But Mister Fel, it's no secret you've been pressing for the Empire to invoke the Anaxes Treaty. That's why you're here, isn't it? To win a vote on the Moff Council?"

Back to bluntness, Jag thought. How refreshing. "In a word, yes."

Moran sighed. "If the Council votes on that at all it will need someone to propose it. And that's putting me in a very difficult position."

"Why are you averse to getting help from the Alliance?"

"Like I said, we're proud of our world and proud of our Empire. We don't need a bigger power to sweep in and save us."

"Need or want?"

"Fair point, but mine stands too. Your son's leading an offensive against these raiders right now. If we smash them today, we won't need *or* want the Alliance's help."

"Moff Moran, I've been reviewing every scrap of intel on these raiders they let me see. Even if Davek *does* win a major fight today there's no guarantee they won't regroup and try again. The simple fact is that we know next to nothing about our attackers. When you're facing an unknown threat you can never be *too* prepared."

"What good do you think the Alliance can do for us?"

"Help us shore our defenses along the border. Provide us with key intel. Assist us if you need to launch a counterattack."

"If we end up needing those things."

"Even if we don't, I believe a partnership will be beneficial. Smaller-scale exercises can be a great way to build bonds between our militaries and our peoples."

Moran took another sip of water. "We can build bonds any time."

"Not like we would here."

Moran looked down into his glass. "Do you know what I was back during the Senex-Juvex crisis? A police officer down on the capital. And when our fleet got wiped out at Karfeddion everyone I knew- human, nonhuman, it didn't matter- was cursing you, Mister

Fel, for allowing it to happen. For getting us involved in a fight that wasn't ours. And then, a month or two later, news came down about *Voidwalker* and the Imperial heroes who'd saved a world. And then everyone went back to loving you and what you represented."

Jag didn't like having to represent anything, though he knew it was a natural result of being a public, political figure. People inevitably invested their own hopes and desires in you. "Why are you mentioning this?"

"Because sometimes the only difference between a good decision and a bad one is a stupid trick of chance, or something you only see in long retrospect." Moran sighed. "I'm sorry, Mister Fel, but with all due respect, I just don't see any reason to invoke Anaxes at this time."

Jag should have felt deflated, but he'd never let his hopes rise too high. "A question?" he said calmly. Moran nodded. "If *another* moff brought it up to a vote on the Council, how would you react?"

"With circumstances as they are now? No, I'm sorry."

"And if they were different?"

"Worse, you mean?"

"Yes, worse."

Moran thought a moment. "That would depend how *much* worse."

"Fair enough. But in theory, you'd be open to the possibility."

"In theory," he admitted. "If the situations gets dire."

It was something, but far from what he'd come here to get. "All right. I understand."

"I'm sorry to make you come all this way, sir."

"You didn't make me do anything. And please, I'm not a *sir*."

"Of course, I'm sorry." Moran looked down into his near-empty glass. "There doesn't seem to be anything else."

"No. I suppose I should get back down to my ship."

"I'll take you down."

Jag rose on unsteady legs and followed Moran out of the room, down the cool gray corridors of the defense station. As he shuffled along he admitted to himself that this had always been a long shot;

asking any politician, even a fundamentally decent one, to go against the motives of the people he represented was preparation for failure. Still, he'd had to try.

They were about halfway to the hangar when Moran stopped in his tracks and plucked a buzzing comlink from his breast pocket. He held it up to listen, and as Jag leaned in a little closer to hear an alarm began to wail, drowning out the relayed words. As quickly as he'd taken it out, the moff shut off the comlink and stuffed it back into his uniform.

"Raiders," Moran snarled. "We're under attack."

When the alarms started blaring aboard *Resilience*, Captain Por Dun was about to lay down for sleep. It took her five minutes from the first klaxon's blaring to put her uniform on and hurry up to a bridge that was frantic and messy with half its crew scurrying to their stations, bleary-eyed from their own sudden wake-ups.

Por Dun marched straight to the tactical station. "Report, Lieutenant!"

The woman was just bringing the holo display online. The sight of it made Por Dun freeze for a second in shock: red markers were falling toward Valc VII like a mighty wave. *Resilience* was sitting in the planet's lower orbit but *Conviction and Ascension* had been out patrolling the middle of the system. *Ascension's* small green wedge lay directly between the planet and the swarming red that would be on it in seconds.

"Comm!" Por Dun barked. "Can we hail *Ascension*?"

The lieutenant wagged his head. "They're putting up some kind of jamming signal, Captain!"

"The planet? The Golan stations?"

"Everything's out!"

"Captain," Lieutenant Yaris said, "They've reached *Ascension*!"

Por Dun looked at the holo and felt her gut tighten. Captain Meleti's ship had been able to scramble a few squadrons of fighters and turn back toward the planet but it wouldn't do anything against such an overwhelming force. At Nesporis III they'd faced a mere raiding party; this was an armada.

"Lieutenant," Por Dun rasped, "How many enemy ships are out there?"

Yaris swallowed. "Over ninety, sir."

"Can we evaluate types yet? Classes, species?"

"Computer's running it through now, sir. Identifying Tylonian, Vagaari, Pal'shoran..." Yaris swallowed. "I'm picking up two frigates, bearing directly on *Ascension*. They're Kaleesh."

The human's voice had gone blank with shock. Por Dun understood why; until now they'd been harassed by the untamed species that wandered the Unknown Regions. The planet Kalee was part of Imperial space. Its people were a race of warriors, irascible and hard to govern, but they were still a part of the Empire, as much as the Muun or Yagai. Or certain Kel Dor.

They'd figure that out if they survived what came next. *Ascension's* green wedge was flickering as red marks overwhelmed it. More were already racing past, heading for the planet. *Conviction* was still in the middle of the system, not having budged from its place where the attack began. Captain Verdon must have been waiting for orders, orders Por Dun wasn't capable of giving with the interference the raiders were pumping out.

Normally a jamming field this dense, one that scrambled all holo- and audio communications, would disrupt its users as much as the enemy. It didn't matter with these raiders; they were different even from the ones she'd faced at Nesporis III. They weren't bothering to take captives. This was about conquest, or perhaps slaughter.

Ascension wouldn't last long. *Conviction* might be saved if it fell back to the planet, joined *Resilience* and the Golan stations to form a barricade around the planet. Captain Verdon needed orders first; Por Dun swung to the comm station and asked, "Lieutenant, can we send a tight-beam data package through this muck?"

The human scowled. "I... I think so."

"Then do it! Tell *Conviction* to all back to the planet immediately. See if we can get in contact with the planet or one of those Golan stations."

"Captain," Yaris interjected, "*Ascension* is gone."

Por Dun looked back at the tactical holo. The destroyer's green wedge, the little flecks denoting its fighter squads, all were gone as though they'd never been. The wave of hostiles gushed forward without even slowing down.

Conquest or slaughter. Everything would depend on what they were after. If they wanted to capture Valc VII they'd have to lay siege and knock out its defenses while taking the cities intact. If they were coming here to wreak havoc, they'd charge forward with implacable fury, not stopping until everything was destroyed. Conquest would be a much more careful, coordinated, nuanced feat, the kind of which these raiders hadn't shown any inclination toward so far.

Her hopes were for conquest, because that might spare some lives, but her gut and her mind expected slaughter.

Her eyes lit on one red holo-marker, larger than the others. "Lieutenant, do they have a flagship there?"

Yaris glanced at her console. "Can't identify the type, Captain. Looks massive, though. Almost... eight kilometers long."

As big as a *Legator*-class destroyer, the kind Admiral Fel commanded. This was an armada, but their attacks seemed as chaotic as before only on larger scale.

"Captain," the comm lieutenant called, "We've made contact with *Conviction*. They're pulling back to the planet now."

Just when Por Dun started to feel relief, Yaris shook her head. "The front end of that wave is catching up on her fast, Captain. I'm not sure if *Conviction* can get back in time."

"Comm, tell Verdon to send out fighters, bombers, anything to get *Conviction* back to the planet. If we can form a wall, we have a chance at stopping them."

It felt good to say, and a few of her officers nodded like they were eager to believe it, but when Por Dun looked at that tactical holo her gut clenched harder. It was no attack she'd ever faced before; even at Karfeddion, all those years ago, it had been one Vong superweapon that had demolished the Imperial fleet. Today it was just a horde, vast and undisciplined, impossible to fight with what they had.

Their only hope was to try.

"Comm," Por Dun said, "Fix a tight-beam on the lead Golan station. We need to start talking."

When Jag and Moff Moran appeared on the stations' operations room the tactical holo was already blazing, bright and big in the center of the chamber. Jagged absorbed it all in an instant: the great red wave rushing toward them, *Ascension's* green wedge as it winked out, *Conviction* turning back to the planet, *Resilience* close by. He saw it and knew there was no way they could win.

He felt very old and very tired, but it passed in one more instant. Just as the station commander appealed for Moran for instructions, Jag clamped a strong bony hand on the moff's shoulder and said, "Issue a planet-wide evacuation. Now."

Moran blinked. "There's no time-"

"No. But if you issue it now- if you *order* it as governor- we can still save some of them."

"There's billions of people down there."

"Then we might have a few million if we're lucky." Jagged looked at the holo and asked the commander, "How long until they get here?"

The man- he looked so young- swallowed. "Twenty-six standard minutes."

Twenty-six minutes to live. The realization came over Jag; he found himself possessed by a surprising inner stillness. An acceptance. All the years he'd lived, all the times he'd evaded the death that had claimed four of his brothers and sisters and too many friends to count; all their weight lifted off him. He felt light, free from responsibility or even grief.

There was still so much to do. He looked around the ops center and found Moran bent over the communications console. As Jag hobbled over Moran turned to look at him. "They're jamming comms. I sent a tight-beam message down to the planet. It will go through all the emergency networks."

"You made the right choice."

"Twenty-five minutes won't be enough to get people offworld," he muttered with the dull dazed tone of a man who couldn't believe this was actually happening.

"We'll have to hold as long as we can," said Jag. "What about the star destroyers?"

They both looked at the tactical holo. *Conviction* already had vanguard raiders nipping at its back. *Resilience* was dropping into lower orbit sidling close to their Golan station. Jag looked around and found the station commander issuing another set of orders, this time to bring the other two defense platforms from the other side of the planet so they could combine their firepower. Golan IVs were incapable of spaceflight, but they did have built-in directional thrusters that could adjust position in planetary orbit. The stations were huge and moved slowly, but they just might arrive in time.

"Those ships are fast," he heard on lieutenant mutter as more hostiles caught up with *Conviction*.

"Commander," said another officer, "We're getting better readings on those ships. Picking up two heavy Kaleesh frigates, both coming down on *Conviction*."

That sent another wave of tension rippling across the room. Non-humans from one Imperial world, joined with the alien invaders in the sacking of another Imperial planet. The Kaleesh had always been independent, violent and hard to rule, but if the whole race had joined in with the attackers then the situation was spiraling out of control faster than anyone had imagined.

The realization also struck that if these Kaleesh were new allies to the invaders then somebody on those frigates might be able to tell them how and why they were won over. They might even know who was behind it all.

The station commander and Moran were back at the comm station. From their chatter they were exchanging text-based messages with *Resilience*. Jagged moved for their post as quickly as he could, which wasn't fast enough. A few cries, followed by a ripple of shocked murmurs, ran through the room. Jag knew what he'd see even before he looked at the tactical holo. *Conviction* was gone too.

"Governor, there's not much we can do with one destroyer," the commander was telling Moff Moran. "You have to take a shuttle and try to run."

"They're almost *here*, Commander. They'll knock me out of the sky."

"But you don't *know* that, sir."

"Will the other Golan stations get here in time?" Jagged interrupted.

"Just barely," Moran said.

"And *Resilience*?"

"Taking up a defensive position right beside us," the commander said. "We'll try to overlap fields of fire as much as possible. But Mister Fel, Governor Moran, if you hurry to a shuttle there still *might* be time to—"

"Please open the line to *Resilience*," Jagged said, so calmly he surprised himself. "I have a request."

The second the enemy entered firing range they were met by a rain of concussion missiles that turned the space over Valc VII with a field of blossoming fireballs. All three Golan stations released time-on-target barrages that intercepted the initial rush of starfighters and gunships while *Resilience* hung back over the central Golan station. They faced the attack head-on and from the center of the bridge Por Dun could see hundreds, if not thousands, of explosive bursts.

It wouldn't be enough, she knew, and as expected Lieutenant Yaris reported that the enemy was still pushing through. The Golan stations fired again. Spaced at equal distances around the curve of the planet, each station's turrets could track the majority of the incoming ships. Though these raiders had displayed no complex or coordinated tactics so far, their great wave seemed to be splitting into three sections of roughly equal size, each one aiming for an individual Golan station.

As predicted, the central group charging for the main station contained both the raiders' massive flagship and the two Kaleesh frigates.

The enemy hurled themselves at the Imperial defense outposts without slowing down. Slaughter was all they intended. Por Dun could see with her own eyes as some of the smaller ships- Tylonian drones and what seemed like manned Vagaari gunships- threw themselves into the shields of the Golan beneath them. The shields held for now but more enemy were coming, charging ahead in a crazed death-frenzy that defied all rules of combat.

Valc VII's planetary defensive shields were raised even as evacuation ships were scrambled. Even now hundreds hung in the upper atmosphere, beneath the invisible interior wall of the shield, waiting for the horrible moment when they'd be free to run from a world rendered defenseless. The shield would hold them off for a little while, but not forever.

Long ago, at the Academy, her instructors had told her that when the enemy had no fear of death you could throw out the tactical guidebook. The raiders had already done that, which meant she had to do the same. It was a strangely liberating feeling. When the lead Golan station had sent them its strange request her first reaction had been to balk. Impossible, she'd thought. Too risky, not to mention a dereliction of the duty she'd been assigned: protecting the people of Valc VII at all costs.

In the awkward exchange of messages the station commander had heard her arguments and rebutted the last one. The only way to save Valc VII was to call for help, and for that somebody needed to breach the jamming field. Somebody had to escape the system.

As to the rest, there's been no rebuttals to give.

The enemy flagship was veering down on the lead Golan station. It was well within firing range now and Por Dun gave the order to discharge all forward batteries. As suicidally fierce as the enemy was she couldn't believe they'd ram their leading vessel into the station, and she felt quiet relief when the tactical readout showed the ship was slowing. So, too, were the Kaleesh frigates and most of the other large capital ships, but others were still slamming themselves into the station's shields. A few of the Tylonian drones- each no wider than a TIE's solar panel- reached *Resilience* and did the same.

"Shield holding for now, captain," her first officer said.

"What about the station?"

"Defenses on overload," Yaris reported. "They don't have much time."

"And those Kaleesh ships?"

"Slowed down. Acceleration's almost zero."

The closest they'd get, then. Por Dun took a deep rasping breath through her mask, then said, "Comm, send our signal to the station. Tell them we're ready."

The crew visibly tensed. She'd explained to the bridge, as quickly as possible, what their goal would be. They'd looked at her like she was mad and she hadn't blamed them. She tried to assure herself that she'd cheated death over and over on as a Voidwalker. She just has to do the impossible one last time.

"Station sends confirmation," Comm said. "Firing solution imminent."

"Helm," she called, "Take us forward!"

The great star destroyer's engines burned to full and it lurched away from the planet's gravitational pull. *Resilience* kept firing all forward batteries and pushed like a spearhead through the skin of enemy line with help from its fighter screen. As they pushed the station added its own help, directing all its turrets to fire on the area immediately ahead of *Resilience*. The view from the star destroyer's bridge filled with explosions so bright most of the crew had to look away, but the goggles of Por Dun's mask dimmed the light so she could stare ahead. She saw past the explosion, to the two Kaleesh frigates looming ahead.

"Helm!" she called. "Break port, twenty degrees. Ion cannons, prepare to fire all starboard batteries!"

Spearing through the enemy line with the full firepower of the Golan station behind them was the risky part; now they were about to try the impossible. *Resilience*'s databanks had a file on the frigates used by the Kaleesh home fleet but there was no telling what potent modifications had been added to these. In the end it didn't matter; the only thing they could do was try.

Resilience veered around the twin Kaleesh frigates. The great enemy flagship, sitting high above them, began to open fire with its ventral guns. The star destroyer's shields shuddered and danced with absorbed energy but Por Dun stared through the glare until she could see that they'd moved alongside one of the Kaleesh ships. Helm decreased speed and shields shunted more power to deflect the deadly rain from the flagship.

Then she called for all starboard ion cannons to open fire.

The Kaleesh were a race of warriors and they flew tough ships, but *Resilience* was four times the size of the frigate and four times as powerful. The ship's shields absorbed the initial blasts of blue energy but attacks from *Resilience*'s bomber squadrons weakened its shields until ion cannon blasts broke through. Lightning danced across the hull. Interior lights went out. Engines flickered, flailed, and died.

And the flagship above them kept firing. *Resilience* was now directly between the lead enemy ship and the Golan station; they could expect no help. As the destroyer's tractor beams latched onto the Kaleesh frigate and its engines strained to push the weight of both ships at maximum velocity, its shields buckled, shuddered, and finally failed. Por Dun watched as explosions burst like geysers through the skin of her ship. Alarms wailed; crews shouted emergency reports. Por Dun watched debris and bodies flush through hull breaches and barely stayed on her feet as the foremost missile magazine detonated, shredding the destroyer's nose and killing hundreds of crew in an instant.

Bracing herself against the tactical console she called, "Helm! Status!"

"Pushing clear, Captain!"

"The frigate?"

"Still have it," Yaris called.

Por Dun looked at the tactical holo. They had punched through most of the enemy line but the second Kaleesh frigate had turned around and was chasing them. She felt relief to see the flagship was no longer firing on them, then dread when she realized it was

kicking in its engines and moving forward to deliver the killing blow to the main Golan station.

"Comm!" she called. "Anything?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Still jammed, Captain."

"That Kaleesh frigate's not slowing down," Yaris reported. "I'm seeing other ships pulling off too, Vagaari gunships."

"Helm, do we have hyperdrive?"

"Yes, Captain. We'll clear the gravity well in.... Four minutes."

She looked at the tactical holo; the Vagaari ships would be on them soon. Lasting four minutes would be almost impossible, but they'd come this far. Trying was all they could do.

Softly, the station commander said, "They've punched through."

Jag could see that. Like half the crew in the ops center he'd watched on the main tactical holo as *Resilience* had broken into the enemy lines with the help of concentrated fire from every possible gun on the Golan station. The star destroyer had plunged through the hole, slowing long enough to disable a Kaleesh frigate with an ion cannon and grab it with a tractor beam so it could be hauled the rest of the way through the enemy line.

With the station's battle-scrambled sensors it was hard to tell what condition *Resilience* was in. It might have been crippled; it might have lost hyperdrive. The tactical holo indicated that several enemy ships were giving chase. It might all have been for nothing, but to save the people on Valc VII and maybe learn who was really behind this invasion, they'd had to try.

In trying, they'd written their own fate. Directing all the guns to clear the way for *Resilience* had left them open to more ramming attacks and barrages from flanking capital ships. In the time it had taken for *Resilience* to break free most of the station's shields had shattered. Even now explosions shuddered through the deck. Jagged braced himself both both hands on a console and looked up, through the transparisteel observation dome that capped the top of the ops chamber. Through it he could see the great dark bulk of the enemy flagship bearing down on them through a hail of laserfire.

Now that he could see it with his own eyes something about that ship looked familiar. It was nothing he'd seen before, not personally, but still he recognized it. It was very faint, a childhood memory from the academy on Csilla where he'd trained so hard to prove himself to all the blue-skinned aliens he lived amongst that a human could be just as good and loyal a soldier as them.

That child could never have suspected the life ahead of him; he'd have never conceived that his future would lay not with the Chiss but the Alliance, the Empire, the Jedi, all of them and none of them at once.

The rain of laserfire obscured the great warship but still he stared up at falling death. Alarms wailed over the sound of distant explosions ripping through the station. People ran frantically around, some barely dodging him as he struggled to stand on weak legs and the deck trembled beneath him.

Suddenly he remembered. Not Csilla, but Nirauan. The history lessons taught to soldiers in the Empire of the Hand about the great battles won by Grand Admiral Thrawn. The great warlord who'd been Thrawn's nemesis in the Unknown Regions, from the race with skin like rainbows and hair like black billowing clouds. He'd had a ship like that, not the same ship, but similar. It was long, dark, menacing; a flagship fit for a king of storms.

Jag had it now, but there was no one to tell. A short bleat escaped his throat. None of the scrambling, panicked crew noticed; he was just an old man staring up, laughing softly to himself.

Another memory came, from almost as long ago. Sitting in a dark observation room aboard the cruiser *Ralroost*, just hours after meeting his mother's brother for the first time. Telling a brown-haired young Jedi pilot that she wasn't *grim* enough. Even then he'd been fascinated by her in ways he'd never been taught to name. Still a teenager, still Chiss at heart, he'd never imagined what she'd be to him in the end.

Jaina Solo: unbreakable, irascible and defiant. A lifetime's guiding star.

The station shuddered again. Alarms wailed louder and muffled explosions grew louder. He tried to cling to that image, seventy

years old but still there: the curve of a girl's face softly lit by ambient light, the drape of hair off her shoulders, and the gleam in her dark eyes that promised everything.

In the black of empty space, just beyond Valc VII's gravity well, twelve TIE Sabers winked into realspace. Three seconds later a dozen star destroyers and support ships joined them. Every new ship flung itself toward the battle raging against the planet's battered defensive shields, with the apex of the advancing capital ships claimed by Davek Fel's *Afsheen Makati*.

Outpacing the destroyers were the fighters. The twelve TIE Sabers in Arlen's squad, the first to join the battle, charged ahead with Marasiah's right behind it. A swarm of TIE-Xs followed, all manned by pilots eager to deliver payback.

Revenge might have been of the dark side but Arlen didn't blame any of them for their anger. As they drew closer to the planet Arlen's sensors confirmed the wreckage of two *Predator*-class star destroyers and two Golan IV stations. A third Golan station was tumbling out of orbit and would impact on the planetary shields, surely killing everyone aboard and maybe overloading the planet's defenses and laying it open to slaughter. In its audacity and savagery, it was an attack far beyond anything the raiders had attempted before.

Everyone behind him was angry but Arlen was worried above all else. When his scouting flight had crossed the Imperial border he'd immediately commed the naval command center at Ord Thoden and asked if there was news of any attack. No, the center had said, then mentioned, after prodding, that all communication with Valc VII had been down for several hours. Since that moment, Arlen had known nothing but anxiety. By the time he and his wingmen had returned to the battle they'd left, Davek's fleet had all but destroyed the raiders there. Once he'd gotten the news Davek had immediately ordered almost every ship they had to Valc VII.

Their father was somewhere on that planet. Their father might be dead already; it would have been just like Jagged Fel to get on a star destroyer and lead the desperate defense of a doomed world.

Arlen had always wanted to believe he'd feel his father's death in the Force. He felt nothing now and prayed it was a good sign.

There was another jamming field up, blocking their comm signals, but a message flashed on his console. When he brought it onto his helmet's display he saw another message from Davek:

Star destroyer fleeing battle point 05-0346 - Intercept now

Arlen changed his vector and called for his squadron to follow. They veered with him and he saw Marasiah's ships were following too. When he checked his forward scanners he saw that, indeed, a *Predator*-class destroyer was fleeing the battle zone, harried by two frigates and a handful of gunships. When he got in visual range he saw the destroyer was badly damaged; then he saw one frigate tucked close to its hull, as though dragged via tractor beam. A Kaleesh frigate, he recognized, which confused him until he saw a second one pounding the destroyer's battered aft. Then it made the worst kind of sense: species within Imperial space were throwing in their lot with the invading hordes.

Attack now, he sent to his pilots. One and all they sent agreement and leaped ahead, weapons blazing, even as a new explosions tore deeper into the destroyer's bow.

The impact knocked Por Dun to the ground. She was barely able to brace her fall with her hands; the impact cracked the right goggle of her mask and as she staggered to her feet everything seemed slashed through with refracted light, alternately red and white like the bridge alarms.

"More ships, Captain!" Lieutenant Yaris called. She was still at her console but pressed one palm against her forehead to staunch the blood flowing into her eyes. The last attack had knocked out the tactical holo but the lieutenant could still pick up some data from external sensor feeds.

"Raiders?" Por Dun rasped.

"TIEs, sir! Jedi ships! And star destroyers!"

She couldn't believe it. She swung to the viewport and made out what she could: dark darting snufighters and lancing green laser blasts.

"What destroyers?" She reached out and grabbed Yaris' shoulder hard. "Can we get identification?"

"Lead ship is... the *Makati*, Captain."

Admiral Fel's ship. Davek's *fleet*, come to save them and pull off another impossible rescue; another cheating of death like they'd done on *Voidwalker* all those years ago. She looked down at Yaris and saw herself as she'd been in the young human: Terrified but determined, desperate and resilient.

"Comm!" she called. Can we get a signal?"

"Still jammed, Captain."

"Tight-beam it to *Makati* then. Tell them we've captured the frigate for them. Do it now."

The bridge shook again. Clinging to Yaris's shoulder was the only way to keep upright. A bright explosion flared ahead, like a pillar of flame bursting up from their hull.

"Damage report!" she called, but before anyone could response Yaris shouted, "Incoming gunship! They're not slowing down!"

Even with uncracked lenses she'd have never seen the ship that got them. It came in from their flank, fast and hard, right for the command tower. It hit the superstructure like a bullet, a mass of metal so superheated it ignited the oxygen of every deck it tore through. For those on the command deck it ended in an instant: an impact so hard no one could stand, the screech of metal and a wash of fire, then nothing.

The rest of the Battle of Valc VII took approximately one standard hour to complete. It was the longest hour in Davek Fel's life.

The moment the Vagaari gunship rammed *Resilience's* command tower, vaporizing it almost instantly, he knew it would be a brutal fight. A squadron of bombers from *Nightwatch* came to help the Jedi fighters destroy the hostile Kaleesh and Vagaari ships, after which Captain Korak's ship reeled in the disabled frigate that Por Dun had died trying to haul out of the battle zone.

Davek tried to put grief and anxiety behind him as the rest of the fleet pushed forward to the planet. The defensive shields just barely withstood the impact of the falling Golan station; the enemy

fleet would have been able to shatter it in minutes had they not turned and attacked the Imperial fleet with stunning precision they'd not previously demonstrated.

How they did it, Davek didn't know. The comm jamming field was just as strong here as it had been in the previous battle. Though the jump to Valc VII had seemed interminably long it had at least given the fleet's communications officers a chance to rig a system of tight-beam text-based communication that allowed Davek to give orders and coordinate fleet movements almost as well as if they'd had proper communications.

Tactics only went so far against an enemy unafraid to die. The battle in the planet's low orbit passed in a fiery flash. Three more star destroyers were utterly destroyed and two more crippled. The *Makati* took heavy damage trying to stop the one enemy ship that was trying to run: a long dark vessel as big as Davek's star destroyer, if not larger. As it broke through the Imperial lines the smaller ships- Tylonian, Vagaari, Kaleesh, Stromma, Pal'shoran and more, but none of designs similar to this one- turned themselves into loving missiles. They lost two destroyers that way. Once the big ship jumped to hyperspace the remaining stragglers suddenly lost their survival bravery and plunged through the hole it had blazed in the Imperial line. The ships that could flee, fled. Those that couldn't fought to the death. It was like the Yuuzhan Vong his parents had fought, but these were no religious fanatics. They were raiders from a motley collection of races that had never banded together before, fighting for no visible reason.

As the battle ended Davek grew more tense. As his tactical team started tallying casualties he ordered the comm officer to make contact with the planet below. He didn't couch his needs in professionalism; he told the planetary communications staff that he had to speak with Jagged Fel immediately.

The wait was long. Seconds felt like hours and with every passing one his breath grew tighter, his body heavier. When the voice came back on the line he knew what it was going to say but he still wasn't ready for it.

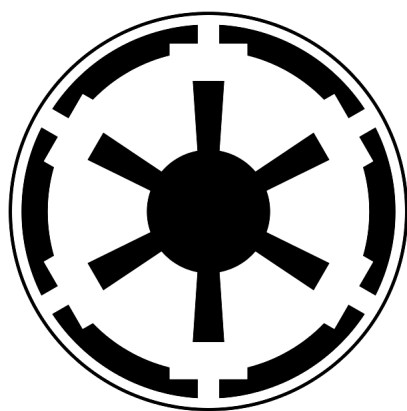
"I'm sorry, Admiral," the voice said. Cautious, apologetic. "Jagged Fel and Moff Moran were visiting the main Golan station when the raiders attacked. There were no survivors."

The bridge swam around him. The comm officer caught him as he fell, propped him up.

"I'm all right, Lieutenant," Davek shook his arm free. "I'm fine."

It was a lie, the only shield he had. He took a deep breath and composed himself, then tried to go about his duties as an admiral should, knowing that nothing could ever be the same.

PART II



ARMIES OF THE NIGHT

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They said it was a ceremony to commemorate the lives lost at Valc VII. That counted over three hundred thousand dead total, including the crews on the Golan defense stations, the three defending star destroyers, and the ships from Davek's fleet that had arrived to end it. Not a single civilian from the planet had been killed. Really, though, it was a memorial service for Jagged Fel.

It was the grandest event Marin Fel had ever been too. It didn't seem real at all. The cavernous convocation center in the heart of Ravelin must have held close to a hundred thousand people. Her father had said they were all close relatives of the people killed at Valc VII, but you only had to look at the numbers once to know there were many grieving families locked outside.

And it might have been mostly the bereaved, but not all. Head of State Avaris gave the opening speech, where she extolled the bravery of the men and women who'd died at Valc VII. On the dark wall behind her, a hundred meters high, a small light flared up to represent each individual lost. As she talked she began listing the virtues of Marin's grandfather, and a large holo-image of Jagged Fel appeared over the central podium.

The image took Marin aback. To her, Jagged Fel had always been an old man with white hair and a trim white beard, eyes that

were dark but kind, and a smile that was always restrained and always honest. The man on the holo-image was Jagged as he'd been fifty years ago when he'd assumed command of the Imperial Remnant during a time of crisis and helped mold it into what it was today. His hair was dark save for the white streak that ran from the scar across his forehead, uncannily like her uncle Davek's. His face was clean and smooth; it belonged to a man younger than her father was now. The eyes were unmistakably his and staring into them Marin found the only comfort available.

After Avaris was done she was replaced at the podium by a thick-set old man who clambered to the post with the assistance of a cane. Vitor Reige didn't bother with preamble; he launched right into his memories of Jagged Fel.

"There were times when I hated that man," Reige said with a canted smile. "I never wanted to succeed him as Head of State, as the elders among you might recall. No, he laid the trap for me to fall into because otherwise a certain unreconstructed admiral might power instead and make herself empress. He never wanted the throne either, so it can't be said he gave worse than he got.

"And you have to remember that. That was the most important thing. That was what *defined* Jagged Fel. He never sought power for its own sake. When it was thrust upon him he handed it off to someone else, but not without taking responsibility for the good of the Empire and the good of the galaxy as a whole. Those were always his concerns, and he died the way he lived, self-sacrificing to the end. Those are the qualities that made him the leader he was and they were qualities I tried to emulate as Head of State. It's a lesson we need to remember, all of us. The best leaders are often those who are backed into the throne."

When Reige finished his speech and stepped down he got scattered and halting applause. Marin's family was seated in front for all to see, and without being obvious she spared a careful sideways look at the rest of her relatives. Her father was in brown Jedi robes, as was her grandmother, who sat between her sons. Marin herself wore an apprentice's plain white tunic. Davek wore his admiral's dress uniform but his sons, despite being apprentice

Jedi like Marin, wore plain dark suits. His wife Marasiah wore a black civilian tunic instead of her Jedi robes; Marin wondered why but tried to pull her attention away from her family and back to the speechmakers.

After Reige were a few officials she didn't recognize, and a representative the Alliance had sent to pay respects. Their talks moved away from the life and legacy of Jagged Fel to respect the others who'd died. Marin knew it was only fair, but her attention started to wander.

The first morning she'd woken up after learning of her grandfather's death she'd been sure the last day was a dream. Reality was settling in now: hard, bitter, uncertain. There had been no more attacks by the raiders but everyone was sure more would come and nobody knew when, where, or how bad it would be. The Fel family had lost its patriarch; the Empire had lost its sense of security. For every single being inside its borders the galaxy had become a darker, more dangerous place.

Even as she kept facing the speech-makers Marin reached out with the Force to try and sense how her family was doing. Her father kept his emotions from his face but she could tell he still felt shocked and empty, uncertain and afraid like she'd never known him to be. Her uncle felt the same, though as he wasn't a Jedi it was harder to sense his feelings.

Her grandmother was a Jedi Master, one of the greatest, and she was the hardest to get a track of. Jaina had spoken little over the past few days and she kept her emotions shielded in the Force. She was putting up a brave front for her entire family; Marin understood that much. If her father or uncle had had a deeper conversation with her in private, she didn't know. Marin wanted to tell her grandmother that she didn't have to hold it all in, that she could never be alone with her children and grandchildren all gathered to protect and support her, but she knew she'd never find the words to say it aloud. Marin loved her grandmother deeply but Jaina was also a stern teacher who'd sustained more loss in her life than Marin could ever conceive: two brothers, her cousin Ben,

countless friends, now her husband, all taken from her by violence. Just thinking on Jaina made her feel like a child.

She directed her attention to her cousins. Roan always tried to put on a cool face but he was still just nine years old and his emotions bled off him in the Force. He'd admired his grandfather as much as Marin or Vitor, maybe more, and his whole being emanated confusion and a child's helpless fear. The first time she'd seen him at the Jedi academy after word from their parents came down, he'd tried so hard to hide the red rims around his eyes. Even at nine years old, beset by grief, Roan had been ashamed to cry.

And then there was Vitor. Marin and her cousin had grown up in step, as close as siblings. She could touch him more easily and deeply with the Force, and even as she pretended to pay attention to the Alliance emissary she sent out a tendril of thought to touch him. He touched back and a warmth passed between them like they'd just squeezed hands. It was a gesture that didn't need words to say *I'm with you* and *we'll get through this*. It meant all the more for it.

Even as she relished how good it was to be connected to someone in this way it brought up another spike of sadness. Her grandfather, like Davek, had no connection to the Force. When Jedi died there was at least the consoling knowledge that they lived on somehow within the Force. For those who were not Jedi, death sounded like mere oblivion. If it was anything else, not even Jedi could know. Right then it seemed that even the Force could be a bitter thing that divided families rather than bind them. She already knew that the Force wasn't enough to keep some families together, but it had never seemed like a bane until that moment.

Vitor gave her a warm nudge, telling her not to worry. She restrained a smile. Her grandfather was gone but the rest of her family was here, unbroken. Until death came to change that they'd remain unbroken. She took solace in that as best she could. As long as her connection with Vitor remained, it even gave her strength.

In a sad way, Davek was glad the Empire was in crisis; otherwise he'd have nothing to do but dwell on his grief. Sitting through the

memorial service for his father had been difficult enough. Placed on the front platform for all the audience and news-net viewers to see, it had been especially difficult to sit still and keep a stoic mask. Not that he'd been tempted to break down in tears; for better or worse those still hadn't come. His overwhelming urge had been to jump from his seat and march off the stage, hauling his wife and sons with him so their grief didn't have to be exhibited for all the galaxy to see.

But he'd known since he was young that his family could never be a private one. They were heirs to layers of history more than a century old, and all the galaxy knew it. Everything they did would be public and political, picked apart by beings who could never understand; it was a burden he dreaded having to pass on to his children, but there seemed to be no way to escape it.

His father had taught him that young, his father who'd taught him so much and now was gone. Whenever he'd felt alienated being a non-Force-user surrounded by a family of Jedi he'd only had to look to Jagged Fel to feel less alone. Now that connection was gone; he'd considered expressing that special grief to Marasiah but couldn't find a way to do it. She'd taken to her Jedi calling with enthusiasm and ardor that would have stunned the young TIE pilot he'd met on *Voidwalker* all those years ago.

When he met Neela Avaris three hours after the ceremony, he felt the relief that comes with escape. He'd chosen a soldier's life. Now more than ever he wanted to live it. He wanted to take the fight to the enemy and make them pay.

He hadn't been told in advance that Admirals Darakon and Grave would be meeting them in Avaris's office, but he wasn't surprised. It was the first time he'd met either of them since Valc VII and they both gave him firm handshakes and simple acknowledgement for his loss. That was all he'd wanted and expected; they had other business to get on to.

"We all know what has to happen next," Avaris said. She sat behind her desk while the admirals all stood in front of her. "We have to attack the enemy and hard. I've discussed with the Supreme

Commander and we've agreed to bring the Second Fleet into an offensive role."

Admiral Grave gave just a tiny nod. He was a few years younger than Davek, with a sharp-featured and clean-shaven face crowned by slick black hair.

Davek knew that officer's gossip placed him and Grave as rivals due to their similar ages and opposite political persuasions, but their interactions had mostly been professional, and in that capacity Grave had never been less than a model officer. Davek asked Avaris, "We'll be working together to coordinate an offensive, then?"

"That's right," she said. "We'll be spreading the First and Third Fleets out to better defend the major worlds. Not just the border planets, but population centers like Bastion and Entralla."

"It will take a lot of ships to defend all our worlds *and* launch an offensive."

"Is that an observation or a suggestion?" asked Grave.

He kept his eyes on Avaris. "You know my father strongly supposed invoking the Anaxes Treaty. It's why he went to Valc VII in the first place, to convince Moff Moran."

"I'm aware," she said simply. "However, I feel it's premature at this time."

He took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. "This wasn't just an attack on our supply lines in the border systems. This was an all-out assault on a major Imperial planet that killed over a quarter-million soldiers. It's our biggest loss since Karfeddion and it would have been a hundred times worse if my fleet hadn't gotten there when it did."

"We're aware of all that," Grave said. "But that's no reason to go begging for help from the Alliance. What happened at Valc VII wasn't a failure of our military, it was an *intelligence* failure."

"Do we have any idea *how* that failure happened?"

"Our people are still looking into it," Darakon said. "It's possible the raiders simply spotted our reconnaissance flights and decided to lay a trap. We still don't know the capabilities of all their ships. With all the strange alien technology they have it's hard to be sure of anything."

Davek sighed. "Speaking of their technology, what did we get from that Kaleesh ship?"

"We've retrieved the datacore from their computer," said Darakon. "It includes hyperspace charts that lead deep into the Unknown Regions."

"Routes we're not familiar with already?"

"That's right."

Davek felt a little relief. When trying to reconstruct what had happened at Valc VII using data from its dirtside sensor stations it became clear that the Golan IV station his father was on had intentionally blown a hole through the enemy lines so Por Dun's star destroyer could escape. On her way out, Por Dun had chosen a route that gave her a chance to seize the Kaleesh frigate and drag it out of the battle zone. That brave, mad gesture had gotten her and her entire command crew killed, but if it yielded critical information on the enemy it might have been worth the sacrifice.

"The more immediate issue," Grave said sharply, "Is what we do with the Kaleesh themselves."

Davek stiffened, relief all gone. In the midst of all the grief and confusion of the past few days, he'd been informed that elements of the First Fleet had been relocated to the border planet and troops deployed on its surface. While the public line was that it was for the world's protection he also knew that the ruling Kaleesh clan-leaders had been placed under arrest while any connection to the attack on Valc VII was being investigated. The whole thing smacked of old-style Imperial oppression, but the grim fact was that at least some Kaleesh had gone over to the enemy, and something had to be done about it.

"I assume you all know about what's being happening on the ground on Kalee," Darakon said carefully. "Our investigators still don't know what connection, if any, the clan leaders have with those who attacked Valc VII. Our interrogators are working on captured crew from the frigate, but as you all know, they're a very... stubborn race."

"There has to be some connection," Grave said. "Even if their clan leaders were unaware, someone on Kalee must know about the ones who attacked us."

"What would you have us do?" asked Davek. "Interrogate the whole planet?"

"That would take more resources than we can spare, unfortunately, but there's other options. Lock down the planet. Prevent Kaleesh from coming or going and make a point to interdict all Kaleesh already off-world."

"Interdict? You mean imprison? This isn't the age of Palpatine."

Grave didn't flinch. "The Empire is at war against an unknown enemy. We can't afford to be trusting. You of all people should know that."

Davek felt a spike of anger but let it pass. He looked down at Avaris. "I am aware, and I'm not.... Weak. I know hard choices have to be made. We should lock down Kalee and increase surveillance on the planet, but arresting any Kaleesh we find just for *being* Kaleesh is too much."

"I respect Admiral Fel's concerns, but this isn't the time to be squeamish," Grave said. "As long as we make clear this is a temporary arrangement, specifically to root out traitors to the Empire, the public will accept it."

"Humans will," Davek told him. "What about the Yagai, the Muuns, the Kel Dor or Yam'rii or-"

"This isn't a decision for you two to make," Avaris said coolly. "This is a security matter which means Admiral Darakon and I will draw a policy for the Moff Councils approval."

Right now the populace was scared and so were the Moffs; Davek didn't doubt they'd vote for anything that promised more security. "Have you decided on a policy?" he asked.

"Yes, actually, and it will be much like what you proposed. Interdiction around the planet. Heightened security on all off-world Kaleesh."

"Do you expect the intel from the frigate to change anything?"

"That remains to be seen," said Darakon. "And not your concern. Copies of the intelligence we've received will go to both

you and Admiral Grave. You'll review it together and come up with a battle plan. Is that understood?"

"Very," said Grave.

"All right," Davek sighed, then remembered. "Another question. When do we expect *Invincible* to be combat-ready?"

"I personally spoke to the KDY chairman this morning," Darakon said. "He expects three weeks to completion."

"What about crew?"

"I've tasked Admiral Hallis with redistributing personnel from the First Fleet."

A super star destroyer required a huge complement; Davek suspected it would take a lot of crew-shuffling to get it filled. "When it becomes operation, will Hallis be in command?"

"Yes, and we intend to put it into combat right away if necessary."

Like his father, Davek had felt the construction a giant new star destroyer was a waste of resources; now he couldn't wait to see it in action. The thought of that behemoth brought another one to his mind. "I have another question, something totally different."

"Go on," said Darakon.

"Have our intel people been able to place that large ship the raiders were using at Valc VII? The one that escaped?"

"You mean the one that acted like their flagship. No, and believe me, we were thorough. We couldn't find any match for its design in our databases or the material the Chiss sent us."

"Disappointing," he muttered.

"Very. Nothing we've pulled from the Kaleesh ship has helped thus far either."

"I'm honestly a little surprised. That ship was clearly leading the battle."

"Yes, and we have comm logs, but every message that passed through that ship was automatically translated to Kaleesh by its ship-board computer. We don't even know what natural language it was speaking in."

"But we *do* have the translated logs?"

"That's right. It will be included on the data package we send you."

"That's good to know." That begged the final question he'd had planned, the one he least looked forward to asking. He took a breath and looked straight at Avaris. "As you might know, the Jedi are meeting on Ossus now. They plan to send search parties into the Unknown Regions soon. If we pass on this intelligence it would help them greatly."

His first response was silence, and he knew he had no chance. Very politely Dakaron said, "With all due respect to the Jedi, this intelligence must be guarded very carefully. We can't simply hand it out to beings not even connected to the Empire."

"The Jedi want the same things we want. Peace and an end to these attacks."

"If we don't know what's going on in the Unknown Regions we can't guarantee how the Jedi will react," Grave said. "The supreme commander is right. Under no circumstances should this information pass to them."

"Jedi have fought and died to beat these raiders."

"Imperial knights," Grave corrected. "Born in the Empire, raised in the Empire, trained on Bastion and loyal."

"Then only share the intel with—"

"With your brother? You *mother*?" Avaris raised a brow. "Admiral Fel, we all know your family history, and we respect them greatly, but can you really guarantee your mother won't share our intelligence with her childhood friends on Ossus?"

Jaina Solo had never been big on following other people's rules. He couldn't even try to argue that point. He knew he couldn't win this fight and he'd only make them question his loyalties by pressing further so he raised his hands in surrender. "I concede the point. But I'd still like to include Imperial knights in my battle plans."

"We'll leave that to your digression," said Darakon.

Davek thanked him; he'd vaguely hoped to get more in the current circumstances but he'd never expected it. Despite all his father had done to make the modern Empire what it was, it was still

the Empire. Some things would never change and pride was one of them.

Because Neela Avaris had wanted to hold a grand memorial ceremony as soon as possible after the attack, the transport from Chiss space arrived the day after. Arlen would have liked for his aunt to have been there, but he knew that Wynssa Fel would have her own ways to say goodbye to her brother.

They took her back to the Fel family apartment after she arrived. The children were waiting there and the novelty of having their great-aunt around, who they very rarely saw, visibly alleviated the gloom that had been hanging over them. Marin's spirits lifted a little as she pummeled Wyn with questions about life on Csilla. None of them had anything to do with Jagged; Marin was distracting herself with curiosity. Arlen was happy for her; Vitor and even Roan started asking questions, as eager as their cousin for something besides mourning. Wyn was too raised-Chiss to let her emotions show, but he was pretty sure she was enjoying it by the end too.

Davek still hadn't returned from naval headquarters when they started putting the kids to bed. The teenagers had more energy than Roan but their grandmother firmly insisted they go to their rooms anyway. They'd probably spend another hour or so laying on their beds, talking in the dark, but that was what teenagers did. The grown-ups needed to have conversations of their own.

"Thank you so much for coming," Marasiah told Wyn when the living room was finally left to the adults. "Can we get you anything to drink?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Wyn covered a yawn with one hand. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll last either."

"Well, I just got a buzz from Davek. That means he's on his way."

"How is he holding up?"

Marasiah considered. "He was very close to his father. So it's been difficult, even if he hides it."

"Jagged was always his link to the rest of us," Jaina said from her place on the couch next to Wyn.

"Because he didn't have the Force," the other old woman said.

"And because of the paths they took."

"Soldiers," Wyn said with a touch of approval.

"And more. As an admiral, Davek had to deal with a lot of politics, just like Jag."

"I hope he deals with them as well as my brother."

Jaina smiled weakly. "I think so."

"The children seem alright," Wyn observed.

"They're all managing in their own ways." Marasiah said as she poured two glasses half-full with Sartinaynian brandy. It was Davek's favorite.

"Marin seemed eager to be distracted."

"I don't blame her," Arlen said. "None of them should have to deal with this."

Wyn went thoughtful. "By the time I was fourteen three of my siblings were already dead."

Grim silence lingered in the room until Marasiah took a sip of brandy and said, "I don't suppose the Chiss are willing to rethink their policy of non-interference?"

"You know they won't, for a number of reasons. Good reasons," Wyn added, a touch defensively.

"Jagged went to Valc VII to get support for invoking the Anaxes Treaty," Jaina said. "He wanted the Moff Council to request help from the Alliance."

"Is your government any closer to budging?"

Marasiah shook her head. "We still don't know what kind of threat these invaders can really muster."

Wyn sighed heavily. "You need to be prepared for anything."

Arlen had already heard his share of stories about the dangers drifting through the Unknown Regions. "Believe me, we are. That's why the Jedi are preparing a scouting expedition."

"You don't understand," Wyn said. "Things have changed."

"Changed how?" Jaina stiffened.

Before she could answer they heard a door open the level below, followed by booted feet stamping themselves clean.

"Just in time," Marasiah said as Davek climbed the stairs into the living room.

After embracing his aunt and kissing her on the cheek, Davek retreated to the counter where his brandy-glass was waiting. As he took a sip he asked Wynssa, "Was Kanarn unable to make it?"

She nodded. "His ship's patrolling the border. I couldn't pull him off-duty again. He sends his condolences, and his love."

"Tell him we're glad." Davek sidled beside his wife. "Are the kids asleep?"

"They're in their rooms," Arlen said.

"Good enough." Davek looked at his aunt. "I'm sorry you missed the ceremony."

"Travel time." She spread her hands. "I came as soon as I could."

"We appreciate that," added Jaina. "We really do."

"It was a good ceremony," Davek added after taking a sip of brandy. "It was a memorial to everyone we lost, of course, but Avaris gave one of her better speeches about father. They roused up Vitor Reige to talk too. His was good. Personal."

"Reige was good," Arlen agreed.

Davek noticed his lack of enthusiasm. "Did you have a problem with something else?"

"Not really. It was just..." He ran through possible descriptors, including *pompous*, *over-formal*, and *too Imperial*, and chose the one least likely to offend Davek. "I think Dad would have preferred something more intimate, that's all."

"What we're doing here is intimate, as family. It doesn't negate what happened yesterday. And father *deserves* a grand send-off. For what he did for the Empire, for everyone. A few speeches in a big hall was the least they could have done. Anything less would be insulting."

"I'm not disagreeing," Arlen said, not wanting to get into a fight.

Jaina cleared her throat. "There's something your aunt was about to tell us."

"About what?"

Wyn clasped her hands together and leaned forward. "Thanks to the hotline we've set up, our intelligence people were able to review some data from Valc VII before I left Csilla. Tell me, Davek, what did your people make of the flagship the raiders were using?"

His voice tensed. "We couldn't place it. What do you know?"

"The Chiss haven't encountered ships like that in about eighty years. But we do know the type."

"Tell us."

"A long time ago there was a warlord who gathered a massive army from many different species in the Unknown Regions. They called themselves the Chosen and they swept across hundreds of systems, conquering or destroying them. Their leader was called Nuso Esva and he belonged to a race called the Erath."

Davek frowned. "Father never mentioned them. Or this..."

"Nuso Esva. He was defeated by the Empire of the Hand and Mitth'raw'nuruodo. We haven't seen the Erath since."

"Not until Valc VII," Marasiah said grimly.

"That's right. I brought information from our archives with me. They describe what we know about the Erath, including the location of their home system, though it's deep in what you call the Unknown Regions. Near the edge of the galactic rim, in fact."

"Is this for *us*," Davek asked, "Or the Empire?"

"I've brought multiple copies of the data. For you. For Imperial intelligence. And for the Jedi."

"That's very generous," Jaina said, tone lightened by surprise.

"It was the least I could do, considering."

Arlen asked his brother, "What about Imperial intel? Have they gathered data from the Kaleesh ship they captured?"

"They have," Davek said, voice stiff.

Arlen frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"No. It's just that fleet command has determined that the intelligence has to remain classified. For operational security. That means it can't be shared with anyone."

"They know what it means," Marasiah said softly.

"There are Jedi about to go into the Unknown Regions right now," Arlen said. "Including Allana. If there's important intel it could mean life and death for them."

"Arlen," Jaina warned.

"I'm sorry," Davek said, soft but firm. "But fleet command's made its decision. I can't break that confidence. They'll just have to go on Aunt Wyn's information."

Arlen wanted to argue but his mother touched him in the Force, telling him to back off. At Davek's side Marasiah shook her head, very slightly.

"Everyone has to comply with regulations," Wyn said to soften the tension. "A military couldn't function otherwise. The Ascendancy agreed to share this information with the Jedi out of respect for your father."

Arlen couldn't take his eyes off his brother's. "Well. I'm glad to see he's appreciated."

"Enough," Jaina said, and gave Arlen another little kick in the Force. "What Wyn brought us points us in the direction we need to go. Can you tell us more about this Nuso Esva and his Chosen?"

"It's all in the report," Wyn said.

"Still. I'd like to hear it from you."

Wyn could hardly refuse a request from her brother's widow. So she talked, recounting Mitth'raw'nuruodo's campaign from nearly a century ago. Everyone listened intently, and Arlen had a little bit of the brandy, the tension from earlier in the conversation receded without draining away entirely. Eventually Davek and Marasiah announced they were retiring for the night. When they disappeared down the hall and into Davek's old room it was down to the three of them: Arlen, his mother, and his aunt.

"I wasn't expecting a history lesson," Arlen told Wyn, "But thanks for giving one tonight. I hope some of it comes in handy."

"All we know for sure is that their flagship is Erath design."

"You said these people have skin like rainbows and hair like black clouds. Sounds like it could be this King of Storms we've heard about."

"Maybe," said Jaina, "But we can't know for sure. Not yet."

She was right. Everything was still clouded in too much uncertainty. Arlen sighed and told his aunt, "I'm sorry your son couldn't make it. I hardly ever see him."

"He's a soldier with his duties. Just like your brother."

"I didn't mean to put Davek in a spot. I just—"

"We know." Jaina touched her son's hand. "But Davek can't break rules just because we're family. Sometimes your father and I... we had to keep secrets from each other too. Secrets between Jedi and Imperials."

"That must have been hard."

"Almost stopped the marriage before it started," she smiled wistfully and squeezed his hand. "But we worked out it. Davek's a good man, just like Jagged. You have to trust him."

"That Imperial intel though... I meant what I said. It could save Jedi lives. It could make or break the mission."

"You can't ask your brother to hand it over."

"I know, but I was thinking...."

"What?" He hesitated; she squeezed a little tighter. "You're thinking of getting it another way, aren't you? That's risky."

"You usually don't lecture people on risk, Mom."

"Just be careful," she said. It wasn't a *no*, not even close.

"Don't worry. I think I know who can do the job for us."

"That's why I told you to be careful."

He smiled at that, against himself, and squeezed her hand back. Wyn said, "I seem to be missing something."

"Don't worry." Jaina tapped a finger to her lips. "Just family matters."

In the long-ago days when she'd served the Empire as a pilot instead of the Jedi, Marasiah had known the Red Sceptre as one of the most select and upscale officer's clubs on Bastion. Membership had never been a goal for her, exactly, but attendance would have been a sign that she'd truly made it and earned a place among the Empire's elite.

That she'd be invited to the place now, as a guest, so long after she'd stopped caring about such things, felt a little strange. She

knew there were more luxurious establishments on the capital, mostly catering to the business-beings who congregated to Ravelin from all parts of the galaxy nowadays. The Sceptre combined luxury with restraint as the best long-running institutions did.

She appreciated that, the restraint. One uncomfortable side effect of being well-known throughout the Empire as its war hero turned Jedi was that you drew attention no matter what you were doing, even if it was just a private meal with an old friend that day after her father-in-law's funeral. Thankfully, Commodore Korosh Vull was able to pull a private room for them to meet at.

"It's not often I get down here," Vull said after their food had been delivered, "But I try to when I can. Have some spice loaf, it's delicious." He was tall for a TIE pilot and five years older than Marasiah, but he'd aged well.

She cut herself a slice and asked, "Are you on official leave now?"

"No. I got called down planetside for some review sessions with other officers from the First."

"Other air commanders?"

"Mostly. Admiral Hallis was there too."

"Ah," she said, and tried some food. He was right, it was good spice loaf. "Is the First planning to stay in the Braxant Sector for now?"

"We *are* the Home Fleet, officially."

She took a sip of wine, also excellent. "So you talked about defensive postures."

"Plans we hope we won't use." Vull nodded. "After Valc VII.... No one's sure of anything."

"I'm aware," she said, and sipped a little more. Since his father's death Davek had been acting withdrawn, like he was trying to lose himself in his duties. Vitor was pensive; Roan was angry and confused, though he tried to hide it. A selfish part of her had been looking forward to meeting up with Vull, the respite it provided. Among the crew from *Voidwalker*, a mere seven TIE pilots out of sixty has survived their harrowing experience behind enemy lines. Their attrition rate had topped even the stormtroopers from Razor

Squadron, and all the dead pilots had been given posthumous commendations on Davek's request.

She didn't keep in touch with any of the other pilots regularly, not after all this time. She was vaguely aware that Pocs Norvok now captained a frigate in the Third Fleet while Ioran Jayk had left the service and ran a small business on Entralla. Unlike them, Korosh Vull had been flown bombers instead of TIE-Xs, and even though he had seniority on Marasiah he'd yielded command of the mostly-interceptor air group to her after *Voidwalker's* previous CAG had been killed in action. Vull was the only one still flying; not TIE Demolishers but one of the few TIE Saber squadrons that had been put into regular service. As Commander of the Air Group for the First's flagship, *Sentinel*, he'd used his connections to help Marasiah procure a few dozen of the new fighters for Jedi use.

"So tell me," she said, eager to turn the topic from all the grief, "Have they decided how they're going to staff *Invincible* yet?"

"You mean did we talk about it at the classified meetings I just went to?"

She shrugged lightly.

"We talked about it. But nothing's decided yet, only that it'll be part of the First Fleet. Admiral Hallis is still looking at crew rosters, trying to decide how to shift personnel."

"That's a big ship. It's going to need a lot of people to crew it. How many TIEs is it supposed to carry again?"

"Seven-hundred and fifty."

"That's more than a fleet carrier. I suppose the assault ships, stormtrooper regiments, and all that are proportional?" He nodded. "Does the First actually have that much equipment, or will they have to draw TIEs off other ships?"

"A little of both. As for staffing, they're going to be shifting a lot of officers from other ships and bringing in a big new batch of academy-fresh personnel to fill the holes, both on *Invincible* and the other ships."

"Sounds like the potential for a lot of confusion."

"Maybe, but you know what they say about Hallis."

She did; he was more an administrator than a strategist, which was fine for peacetime, but if the raiders made it as far as the capital he might not put up the best fight.

"Well," she said, "I guess we should be glad we're getting a big new monstrosity to defend with."

Vull shook his head. "You think it smacks of the 'old' Empire, don't you?"

"It doesn't?"

He waved a fork at her. "I understand why a Jedi's not nostalgic for the days of Palpatine, but the 'old' Empire would never have let these raiders catch us off-guard and kill thousands of good soldiers."

"Wouldn't it? The 'old' Empire got killed by a handful of scrappy rebels."

"Point. But you can understand why people want to feel secure. Don't *you* want to feel secure?"

"Of course I do." She wanted it for herself, for her husband, and for her sons more than anything. "I'll give you this. A brand new super star destroyer should go a long way to keeping us safe. If it won't, then we're *really* in trouble."

"If it won't," Vull said, very serious, "We'll just have to build another Death Star." She scowled. He smirked and added, "Joking, obviously. By the way, do you want another glass of wine? I'll call the waiter."

"Go ahead," she said, and finished the little bit she had left. She knew Vull, knew he'd be kidding, but some other people wouldn't be nowadays. In a way, that was as upsetting as the raider attacks themselves. These alien invaders could destroy ships, ravage planets, and break families forever, but they couldn't get to the Empire's soul. The only way to break that, she thought, was from the inside.

They called the orbital shipyards and supply docks orbiting the dead planet Bilbringi one of the Twin Pillars of the Empire, along with Yaga Minor. The great facility was crewed by over four million beings, not including the millions more assigned to the Third Fleet

vessels that moved in and out of its berths at an increasingly hurried pace. Bilbringi itself, at the Coreward edge of Imperial space, was less threatened by these raiders than most systems, but ships from the Third were being spread out into a defensive posture, leaving yards that seemed empty and a staff that was more on edge than any time in recent memory.

Still, for over four million beings, Bilbringi was home or something like it, and crisis or no, they tried to get on with their lives the best they could. It was still hard; since the Battle of Valc VII the new networks were pumping out endless rumors about these mysterious raiders and what the navy planned to do about them. They interspersed it with repeated coverage of the battle's aftermath, extolling the dead while simultaneously casting aspersions.

According to Marian Briggs, this had had happened once before, seventeen years back after the Battle of Karfeddion. If anything it had been worse then. Lukas had to take his wife's word for it; he'd been on *Voidwalker* the whole time, trapped behind enemy lines with no idea what was happening back home.

A lot of the surviving Voidwalkers had climbed up the ranks since then. Davek Fel was the most famous, but he was hardly alone. The vice admiral in charge of Bilbringi's operations, Devlin Jaeger, was another Voidwalker. As for Lukas himself, he'd stayed in the service but adopted a position that was less exciting but more suited for a man with a wife and two children. He had no problem with that; he'd gotten too old for a stormtrooper anyway.

As deputy chief quartermaster he commanded a desk and a supply chain that stretched across the Empire's second-largest fortress world. For the ten years he'd been at Bilbringi, living in the habitat section and raising his son and daughter there, he'd never once considered his life at risk. Even after Valc VII he repeatedly told himself that the likelihood of a large-scale assault on such a heavily-fortified location was absurd. He believed that, but the news-nets were trying very hard to make him doubt that assurance.

Sensationalism was what got them viewers, and he wouldn't have minded it so much if it hadn't been for Leena and Polaw. His

daughter was nine and his son was seven, which meant they were both in the age range where they shouldn't have to be exposed to all the ugly news but they knew something was happening and were smart enough to find out on their own even if their parents tried to block it out. The best thing he could do was to talk to them about it and counteract the hysteria.

It was, therefore, with an air of surrender that Lukas sat at the breakfast table, his wife across from him, his children at either side, all of them angled in their seats to watch the INN morning show. Just a week ago the program had been full of casual fluff; interviews with popular entertainers or stories of strange occurrence on backwater planets nobody would otherwise care about. Now, like everything else, the morning show was all about Valc VII and the mysterious alien raiders who were about to deal imminent doom on everyone.

As a further sign of just how strange things were, the INN reporter- a woman half Lukas' age with green eyes and shining white teeth- was sitting down to interview not some flippant celebrity by Moff Corrien Veers, governor of the Prefsbelt Sector. Even though the Empire had gone a long way to toward directing moffs from military affairs into civilian roles, Lukas knew Veers possessed outsized if unofficial sway with Yaga Minor and the Second Fleet. They also said he was still active with his old organization, the ISB.

He gave no indication of that as he chatted with the INN interviewer. He came off as more personable than you'd expect from a moff, throwing in winning smile and the occasional joke, though as the interview moved away from opening fluff his tone got more serious and he spent less time looking at the pretty reported and more at the audience.

"I know there's been a lot of rumors floating around, and there's only so much I can say," Veers told them. "Not because I don't want to tell you or I'm not allowed, but because I can't. As you know, I'm not privy to military secrets. I'm a civilian, so I have a lot of the same questions as you people out there. I look closely at a lot of the information available from Valc VII and I think, *This doesn't make*

sense. I'm hoping the military can fill us in because we *deserve* to know."

"What sort of things don't make sense?" asked the reporter.

"Well, there are a few things," Veers told the camera. "Here's something curious. As you probably know, we had three star destroyers assigned to Valc VII. At the moment the raiders attacked only one of them was in orbit over the planet, the lead ship *Resilience*. The other two, *Conviction* and *Ascension*, were patrolling the outer parts of the system. When the raiders attacked both of them were wiped out before they could retreat to defend the planet. Two full star destroyers, their entire crews, all gone. And why? Because they were in the wrong position at the wrong time."

"A sad coincidence," the reporter said.

"But is it? Can we be sure? The raiders seem to have very carefully and intentionally outmaneuvered our attack force to strike Valc VII while the rest of the Fourth Fleet was far away."

"Are you suggesting an intelligence failure?"

Veers sighed. "We know *something* went wrong. Now, as you know, I used to be part of the ISB. I would never impugn their competency. Which is why I'm suggesting- only suggesting- that something else might be going on."

"Yes, but what *kind* of something else?"

"I only have ideas. I can't anything for sure."

"Can you give a suggestion, then?"

Veers seemed to hesitate, then relent. "I can give you one. And of course I'm just throwing up a flag. I'm sure there may be a perfect acceptable explanation and if the military wants to provide one, I'd love to hear it. But there's something else if you look at accounts from the battle. Only one of our destroyers was actually at Valc VII when the attack began. You'd think it would hold position to defend the planet. However, that's not what happened. If you look at the records taken by the civil defense stations on the planet- they're public record, anyone can look at them- you'll see that last destroyer, *Resilience*, actually went *through* the attacking enemy wave. The Golan stations were fighting for their survival but *Resilience* was trying to flee."

"Are you sure there's not another explanation?"

"Well, who can say? I can't. But if you look at the record you'll see something even stranger. *Resilience* used its tractor beam to tug a damaged raider ship out of the battle zone. This ship was- and I'm sure you've all heard this by now- a Kaleesh frigate."

"If the audience is not aware," the reporter added, "Kalee is currently under lockdown as the military investigates just how these ships from an Imperial-controlled world ended up in the attacking fleet."

Veers gave a heavy sigh and fixed the camera with a sad stare. "It's painful to admit, but not all the member worlds of the Empire appreciate the stability and prosperity we've brought them. It's especially true of aliens like the Kaleesh."

"The Kaleesh in particular have had a very, ah, turbulent history..."

"Oh, I know. They're a difficult people who've never got on well with their neighbors. It's in their nature to be irascible. Frankly, that they'd make an alliance with the raiders doesn't surprise me. It's sad to say, but true."

"To bring us back on topic, governor, how does this relate to *Resilience* leaving the battle zone?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps *Resilience* was trying to tow the damaged ship to safety."

"You mean it was *helping* the enemy?"

"It's possible. I wouldn't have thought so, but consider this. Of the three star destroyers assigned to Valc VII, the commanding ship was *Resilience*. We know there was *some* intelligence failure that caused our losses. Now consider, it must have been the captain of *Resilience* who sent the other two star destroyers on patrol away from the planet, in locations where they wouldn't be able to stop or defend themselves against the wave of attackers."

The reporter looked stunned. "That's... a bold accusation. An Imperial captain, betraying his command?"

"*Her* command, actually. The captain was a Kel Dor named Por Dun. Most imperial captains wouldn't try to run from a battle zone

and leave Jagged Fel and the Golan station crews to be slaughtered either."

"Governor Veers, wasn't *Resilience* destroyed by the enemy? Wasn't Captain Por Dun killed?"

"The command tower was rammed by a Vagaari gunship, yes. But from all we've seen these raiders and incredibly chaotic. Perhaps the Vagaari didn't know or didn't care about any deal Captain Por Dun might- or might not- have made with the Kaleesh." The reporter opened her mouth to interject but Veers went on. "This is all speculation, of course, and I could easily be wrong. I hope I'm wrong and I hope the military releases the facts to prove me wrong. But for now all we can do is suppose."

"We, ah, thank you, Governor Veers, it's been a pleasure having you but I'm afraid it's time to hear from our sponsors."

"I was glad to be here," Veers said pleasantly. "I'm glad to be able to talk to our citizens directly. In government you feel detached from the people you serve too often."

"That's very true. Thank you again, Governor. And now we'll take a break."

Lukas reached for the controls and turned off the audio on the commercials. As soon as he did Leena looked right at him and asked, "Dad, why would our aliens want to attack us?"

He sucked in breath and looked sideways at his wife. Marian gave him a *you explain this one* shrug.

"I can't say why the Kaleesh got involved," he told his daughter. "What Veers said was right. They've always been a pretty... difficult people to govern. Very warlike. But not all aliens are like that."

"What about that captain? Why would she do it?"

"We don't *know* she did anything. And honestly, it was a little irresponsible for him to go on the air like that and imply an Imperial captain turned traitor without evidence."

"He said he hoped it wasn't true," Polaw said through a mouthful of sloppy cereal.

"We should *all* hope it wasn't true. And I bet the military will release the facts soon and clear this mess up."

"Do *you* know what happened?" asked his son, with wide blue eyes that still innocently assumed that just because his dad put on a major's uniform he was somehow privy to all the secrets of the vast Imperial military machine.

"That's way beyond my pay grade," Lukas said.

"But you'd never keep secrets from us, would you dear?" asked Marian playfully.

"No, of course not," Lukas sighed and glanced at his wrist chronometer. "And it looks like time's up. I need to get to work."

As he rose from his seat Leena looked at him with her set of big imploring blues and asked, "Daddy, what if the aliens come *here*?"

"They *won't*," he said firmly, and hoped it was true. "Now I've got to run. I'll see you all tonight."

He circled the breakfast table, popping off two kisses on squirming foreheads and one on his wife's lips, then hurried out the door. As he rode the automated maglev train from the station's habitat section to the secured military complex he double-checked to make sure his uniform was straight and perfect and tried not to think about his conversation with the children. As much as he tried to assure them he knew they'd worry. Maybe they were even right to, but it did no good when men like Veers went on the most popular news network in the Empire and started spreading rumors.

The worst part of what Veers had said was that he couldn't dismiss it entirely. He very strongly doubted that the Kel Dor captain on *Resilience* had done anything wrong, no matter how strange things looked. He'd come from an almost purely human world himself and it had felt strange at first to serve alongside aliens, but he'd discovered that they made no worse officers than humans. He'd even earned himself a special medal, in addition to the one all the surviving Voidwalker had received, commending his valor in saving the frigate's Yagai engineering chief during their boarding raid on a Mandalorian attack ship. No, if this Por Dun wore the uniform then her loyalty was assumed until proven otherwise. Yet at the same time it was clear some Kaleesh had committed treason and joined a murderous attack on an Imperial world. That race had never assimilated properly into the Empire like

the Yagai or Muun had. Something had to be done and locking down Kalee was, as far as Lukas was concerned, a good start.

Where things ended was another issue entirely. He had no clue about that one, but he was not a moff or an admiral, just a quartermaster. When he got to his office he sat down ready for a day of boring, safe desk work.

He was surprised to see a new message that had come for him overnight. Instead of being addressed to the Deputy Chief Quartermaster of Bilbringi it came for Lukas Briggs, personally, and it was from one Colonel Homs Malkin of Yaga Minor, giving his former subordinate heads-up that his regiment was about to be transferred to Bilbringi.

Lukas checked the roster change schedule and saw this transfer was set for the coming week. The knowledge gave him a little glow inside. Malkin had been his sergeant on *Voidwalker* once upon a time. Out of approximately eighty stormtroopers assigned to that ship, less than twenty had come out alive. They'd been at the forefront of the mission; without them *Voidwalker* and its seven-hundred-some crew would never have gotten home at all. There was a common bond between all the surviving Voidwalkers, but in Lukas' humble opinion no bond was stronger than between the few and proud survivors of Razor Company.

He sent out a reply, personally welcoming Colonel Malkin to Bilbringi and offering to buy him a drink in the best officer's lounge when he arrived. It was the least he could do; for a military man, even a quartermaster, you never knew when or if you'd see your friends again. Now more than ever, you needed to treasure them.

"I have to admit, I was never expecting you to be so.... Public," Damien Corde said. He was meeting Veers in the same place as before, the empty meeting room looking out on the brutal administrative buildings and the green crown of the Pellaeon Gardens. He leaned back in his chair, looking up at the older moff as he stood by the window.

"I said what needed to be said. I wasn't the only one thinking it."

He was playing it like he had for that INN interviewer, earnest and honest, but Damien knew the man better than that. "You must have seen the same reports I have. That Kel Dor captain was trying to capture the Kaleesh frigate and salvage it so we could take it apart for intel, just like we're doing now."

"That's what it *looks* like, from what you and I can see, but we'll never recover comm logs from *Resilience*, so we'll never know for sure," Veers shrugged.

"You're planting doubt in people's minds."

"They *should* be doubting and they *should* be on guard. Avaris has botched all this with a slow response."

"At least we've got Kalee on lockdown."

"We should have arrested every Kaleesh off their homeworld, but Avaris was too weak for that," Veers shook his head.

"I'm sure you didn't call me here to discuss the news."

"No. No, Agent Corde, I've got a new assignment for you."

He'd expected as much and sat up in his seat, attentive. Since coming back from Kuat he'd had less than two weeks to spend with Valera. He'd wanted more, much more, but he had a duty to his Empire and his Empire needed him.

"This mission's going to be different from the last one," Veers said. "More complicated and lasting for an indefinite period."

"Tell me what I need to know." His gut told him he'd be going into the Unknown Regions this time, probably to ferret out whatever intelligence leak had let the raiders take Valc VII by surprise.

The moff took a breath. "I'll be blunt, Agent Corde. We need to bring the Chiss into the war."

Once again Veers surprised him. "Why? *How*?"

"You know the first part as well as I do. The Ascendancy has a very capable, very disciplined military. They could have wiped out the raiders themselves by now, probably, except for their non-interference, no-first-strike policy. Instead they sit on their blue hands and let thousands of our men die. Thousands more *will* die unless we get the Chiss to fight they like they should have done from the start."

"I agree. But *how*?"

"That should be obvious too. The Chiss only attack if they've been attacked first."

Pieces clicked into place. His jaw dropped; Veers had never asked anything this bold of him before. "You want me to stage a false flag?"

"Exactly. You understand this has to be very secret and *very* careful. If we don't convince the Chiss the attack is authentic it might even come back on us."

"But *how*? Do you want to use Kaleesh ships?"

"No. We're still not sure how many Kaleesh actually joined that horde. My suggestion is Vagaari, since we have very thorough information about their ship types and combat methods."

"Provided by the Chiss themselves, no doubt," Damien said dryly.

"Intel work is full of ironies."

"And *how* do you expect me to capture a bunch of Vagaari ships?"

"Not by yourself, I'd imagine."

"Obviously. Do you have anything more helpful?"

"I do, actually." Veers placed a datacard on the table. "That has everything you'll need. All our data on the Vagaari, including locations of staging points in the Unknown Regions they like to use. Also account numbers and verification information for several well-stocked Brentaal-registered bank accounts. Finally, contact information for the people I suggest you hire to do the job."

Damien had to give Veers credit; he was a man who thought things through. "Who do you know who can hijack Vagaari ships for us?"

"Mandalorians," Veers said simply.

The surprises kept coming. When Damien was younger the famous mercenaries had laid low on their homeworld, rebuilding it from the devastation of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. Just as their names were starting to pass into memory they'd shown up in the Senex-Juvex Sectors, acting as the personal army of the power-mad revolutionary Savyar. They'd killed a lot of good Imperials in that

capacity, but Damien wasn't a man to hold a grudge; intelligence work, like the mercenary business, required a certain dispassion.

Since that time the Mandos hadn't done anything as big. The fact that Savyar had been a genocidal lunatic had stained their reputation somewhat, and as far as Damien knew they'd spent most of the intervening years selling their services to various brutal potentates on backwater Rim worlds that nobody cared about. They were still active though, and he didn't doubt they were capable of doing the job.

"That could work," Damien said at last.

"I'm glad you agree. I've been recommended them by a friend who's employed them in the past and he vouches for their services. The information there should help you set up a meeting."

"They'll want a hefty price for this kind of work."

"And I'll pay it. Just don't give in too easy."

"Don't worry, I know how to negotiate." Damien palmed the datacard. "What else?"

"Nothing for the moment. You know how to contact me if it's absolutely necessary."

"And if it's not?"

"You're a smart man, Agent Corde. I'm sure you can take care of yourself. Just be sure to notify me at three points." He counted off on his fingers. "When you secure a contract with the Mandalorians. When you secure Vagaari ships for use. And when you've staged the attack on the Chiss."

"Is there a timetable for this?"

"As long as it takes to get it right, but don't dawdle. There's no good reason to send thousands of good Imperials to their deaths. Let the aliens kill each other off. It's what they're best at anyway."

An hour after his meeting with Veers, Damien finally got back to his home. It was late afternoon and Valera was home from work. She knew he had an important meeting today and when he stepped through the door there was grim expectancy in her eyes.

"How long will you be away this time?" she asked.

"Hard to say. But a while."

She looked crestfallen and he put his hands on her shoulders. "The good news is that I don't have to leave right away. Tomorrow I'm off, but for the rest of the night it's just you and me and no one else."

He kissed her forehead once. Instead of tilting her head up for another kiss on the mouth she kept it bent low.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

She shifted a hand to her abdomen. "I'm pregnant, Damien."

He stared. She lifted her head up and light through the window caught her eyes. She smiled weakly and ran a palm across his face. "Don't stay gone long. Please."

He realized his jaw had gone slack and closed it. Softly he said, "You're sure?"

"Just saw a doctor today."

"Do you know if—"

She placed her fingertips on his lips. "Not yet. Too early." She knew he'd always wanted a son.

"That's, ah... That's amazing news," he whispered.

She nodded and rose up on her toes to kiss him, slow and soft. "You're definitely coming back, right?"

"I will," he said, more sure than ever and more determined to succeed. He had to come back to his wife. He had to watch his child grow up. And he had to bring the Chiss into the fighting.

Starting a bigger war was the only way to secure safety for the Empire and for his family. It was twisted, but as Veers had said, his line of work was full of bitter ironies.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Compared to other cities of comparable size and importance across the galaxy, Ravelin was famously safe. Security devices were ubiquitous in public places. The police were easy to contact and fast to respond to reported crimes. On Coruscant the lower levels were notorious as lawless places you risked your life just by entering. On Ravelin, and Bastion's other cities, they claimed you could wander through any dark alley in the middle of the night and feel safe. It was, Arlen thought, a lingering aspect of the Empire's old authoritarian nature, but not an unwelcome one overall.

The downside was that it made it very hard to do something and be sure you weren't being watched. The area where Arlen walked now was a neighborhood south of Ravelin's business core and popular as a night-time entertainment district for bureaucrats and professionals. Ravelin also had a reputation as being more buttoned-up and conservative than comparable cities in the Alliance, but if someone wanted to waste away a night on drinking and revelry they could do it here.

Jedi were not known for partying it up, and neither were middle-aged men with teenage daughters back home, but Arlen tried to blend in with the crowd as best he could. A dark civilian

suit, carefully ruffled, conveyed the impression he was a bureaucrat looking to unwind, and he'd added some short-term dye to his beard, which had been getting distressingly gray lately.

When his contact had told him the place in which they'd meet he'd balked, but he stood outside it now, looking up at the glowing holographic sign that read Emperor's Black Bones. He knew from his mother that, a generation or two back, the phrase had been a common curse. That it was now the name of one of Ravelin's more fashionable yet affordable nightclubs was just one of many strange ironies of Imperial history.

The inside of the club was spacious, with a broad dance floor in the center beneath a shifting holo-displays of various infamous Imperials of old projected in incongruously garish colors. Arlen stood for a moment on the dance floor's edge, watching a couple of sinuous young women dancing beneath the gaunt glowering face of Grand Moff Tarkin dyed like a shimmering rainbow. The holo shifted to a plump pink Warlord Zsinj twisting his mustachios, and finally to Grand Admiral Thrawn colored a very un-Chiss-like shade of yellow-green.

He was too old and weirded out for more, so he got away from the kitsch as quickly and casually as he could. The prices for drinks were less outrageous than he'd imagined, and after purchasing a cocktail cheekily branded the Fun Crusher, he hunched over the counter and refused to look back at the dance floor. If he saw a glowing pink Darth Vader mask he'd march right out.

The spots to his right were occupied by a couple young enough to make him envious. They were pressed to close they almost shared a stool, and despite their proximity they talked loud enough for him to hear over the throbbing bass that rattled his glass every two seconds.

"See, you're not worried any more are you?" the young man teased.

"Mmmm... maybe a little," his lady friend said with a drunken giggle.

The young man pulled her tighter. "Seriously. Look around you. Does this look like a place under threat? No way. They only got the drop on us at Valc VII because that that alien captain fed 'em intel."

Arlen stiffened. He'd only talked to Davek once since Moff Veers had given that INN interview and his brother had been as mad as Arlen had ever seen him.

"Was that what it was?" the girl said. "I thought it was the Kaleesh that set it up."

"No, they were in it together, didn't you hear? And I heard some of those Yagai colonies by the border might have gone over too."

"Really? There's a Yaga in my office. He's, I mean, he's all right but they're so... Kind of stiff... Cold..."

"They're *bugs*, Meka."

"Yeah, but the Kaleesh, they're-"

"Savages. I hope they keep Kalee on lockdown 'cause I don't want to have to fight them."

The girl ran her hand over his face. "I saw one on the street. Yesterday, I think. It had one of those war-masks on. I didn't even realize they were still letting them walk around. I mean, how can you trust them if they won't show their faces to outsiders? How can they *expect* us to trust them? At least the Jedi show their faces. They fight for us, we can trust them, mostly."

"We can trust *our* Jedi, the ones here on Bastion, sure, but the rest? Have you seen that Wookiee they've got in charge? I remember back when I was a kid they had a human, a Skywalker, in charge, and he looked okay, but that thing they've got now looks like he'd bite your head off as soon as look at you."

It was getting very hard to resist the urge to act in a very un-Jedi-like manner, and Arlen was bracing himself to hop off the stool and correct some wrong opinions when he felt one hard tap on his shoulder. He spun around to see no one close behind him. He frowned, turned back to his half-drunk Fun Crusher, and felt a poke in his ribs. He sighed, got off the stool, picked up his drink with one hand, and looked around the crowd until he saw a very familiar face half-lit by the light spilling off the dance floor. The woman it belonged too was also a little too old to be hanging

around a place like this, but she'd put on a more fashionable outfit and even run a few bight dye-streaks through her shoulder-length black hair. Their eyes met across the distance and Tamar Skirata gave him a tiny nod.

When he reached her Arlen asked, "Did you pick this place just to get at me?"

"Will you be mad if I say yes?" Her smile was tight, teasing. He was surprised how warm it made him feel.

He looked at the holos above the dance floor. No Vader, thankfully, just a spherical Death Star glowing a very bright fuchsia. As he watched he saw a tiny holographic X-wing fly away and disappear; a second later the off-color Death Star burst into a giant holographic fireball over the heads of twenty-somethings too busy dancing to notice.

"I can't take much more of this," Arlen groaned. "Can we please go?"

"There's a private corner. Come on."

He followed Tamar to a small booth that was as far away from the lights and noise as possible in this establishment. After they sat down on opposite sides of the table she asked seriously, "How are you holding up?"

He sighed and leaned forward. "As best as I can. When I wake up every morning it just... doesn't seem real."

"How your mother?"

"Fine. I think. I don't know. She's lost so much over her life I think she's... I don't want to say used to it, but she's more *accepting* than I'd thought she'd be."

"And Marin?" Her voice tightened.

"She's... dealing. She's scared but she doesn't want to sit around and do nothing either. Maybe it's *because* she's scared, but she's started talking like she wants to go off and fight the enemy herself."

"Of course she does. She's my daughter too."

"Good point." Arlen looked at the table. Marin did have a streak of her mother's restlessness, but unlike Tamar she seemed to be happy at the Jedi academy. Of course, she'd been raised in it from the start and she had Vitor to train alongside, to trust and bond

with. Arlen had tried to provide similar support for Tamar during the short years she'd spent on Bastion, learning more about the Force than her late Mandalorian grandfather has passed on. They'd bonded alright, in a way he should have expected, but after a few years it had become clear to them both that after a lifetime as a Mandalorian she couldn't just turn around and become a Jedi Knight. Still, seeing her again- the sharp dark eyes, the wry smile- made him wonder if maybe, somehow, they could have done things differently.

He could tell she was getting maudlin thoughts too, and to break the tension he asked, "Did you get what I asked you to?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be here otherwise." She stole a glance at the busy club, then took out a portable data-drive the size of her fist. She passed it across the table and Arlen took it. Their hands didn't touch.

"Was it hard to get?"

"It wasn't easy, but it turns out the Force can be very helpful in getting you into Imperial intelligence storehouses."

"You didn't hurt anyone, did you?"

"I didn't leave a trail of destruction behind, don't worry," she said sarcastically, but with a note of hurt. As a Mandalorian she'd be raised to fight ruthlessly and to harness her inner anger and adrenaline as fuel. She'd never been able to master the restraint that defined a Jedi Knight- either in fighting style or in ethics.

"It's all there, Arlen," she said. "Everything that the ISB has on the Kaleesh ship they captured. That includes files from its main computers as well as records from crew interrogations."

"Did you make a copy?"

She hesitated for a second, then nodded. "I wasn't planning to sell it to anyone."

"Anyone in particular or anyone at all?"

"Actually, I thought you might want me to run a hard copy over to Ossus. That way you don't have to risk beaming super-classified Imp intel halfway across the galaxy."

"You'd do that?"

"I was expecting that you'd ask."

He *had* planned to ask, but he hadn't expected her to accept. In her years since leaving the Jedi academy she'd had, best he knew, an itinerant life. She couldn't go back to her family on Mandalore after making an enemy of the mercenary band's leader, Gevern Auchs. She'd told him she made a pretty good living as a bounty hunter thanks to the Jedi tricks she'd picked up, but he'd always wondered what else she did to make a living.

"Thank you for volunteering," he muttered softly.

"You said that from what the battle records showed, it looked like your father died trying to help capture that ship. This is the least I could do to honor him."

"Thank you," he said again.

"Did your brother not have access to any of this? I thought a fleet admiral would."

"He's got access to some," Arlen said gruffly. He didn't want to get into this now. "However, he was ordered not to share it with the Jedi. Operational security."

"Ah." Tamar said, then added, "He has a point. Considering."

"I know. I'm not mad at him."

The look Tamar gave asked *do you really think you can lie to me?*

"I'd hoped he'd be more accommodating. But he's got his duty and I have mine."

"That's exactly right. So you shouldn't hold it against him."

He couldn't believe he was getting this from Tamar. When she'd lived on Bastion her relationship with Davek had been brusque at best.

"I mean it," she pressed. "He's your brother, Arlen. He's *aliit*. That means—"

"I know what it means." The *Mando'a* term denoted the most inviolable of family bonds. You could say a lot about Mandalorians, but you couldn't say they didn't value family.

And because she'd made the opening he had to make the offer. "Once you're done on Ossus, you can come back to Bastion. Use a real flight transponder with your real name. Set down in the Jedi academy and spend some time with Marin." She shifted

uncomfortably and looked away. He added, "Unless you've got someplace else to be."

"No. No, you're right, I should go see Marin."

"I know she wants to see you. And given what's happening, I don't know if I'll be able to stay at the academy long or if I'll be called out to fight someplace. Marin's *not* going anywhere, no matter what I do, but if she has you around for a little while, I think it would help her.

She nodded, still avoiding his eyes. "You're right. I'll come back once I'm done on Ossus."

"Thank you."

She nodded again. When they'd split up Tamar hadn't objected to Arlen raising their daughter as a Jedi. She'd relinquished Marin for the same reason she was reluctant to see her now: shame. She was good at hiding it, but Tamar had never forgiven herself from breaking with her people. Arlen had told her again and again that it wasn't her fault, that she'd done the morally right thing after Gevern Auchs made the Mandalorians into pawns for a genocidal Sith Lord. But guilt was as irrational as it was strong; deep down Tamar felt she'd failed her birth family and didn't deserve another. He knew, too, that guilt and shame were part of that anger she could never surrender.

"Do you still have the lightsaber?" he asked.

"Of course," she said firmly. It was an inheritance from her great-grandmother, a Jedi of the Old Republic who'd left the Order to marry a clone soldier.

"Use it to fight any Sith Lords lately?" he asked and tried a smile.

She allowed a reluctant one of her own. "If I do, you'll be the first one to know."

"That's good. Thank you for this Tamar, really. This could save Jedi lives."

She looked back at the lights of the dance floor. "Anything else?"

"Not right now. But I'll tell Marin to expect you." It was a crude ploy but it would do the job.

"I won't disappoint her. Goodnight, Arlen. I'll see you around."

And then she stood up and slipped away into the crowd. He quickly lost sight of her, and moments later lost her track of her in the Force.

He sighed and looked down at the table. The kitschy cocktail he'd ordered sat in front of him, half-drunk then forgotten. He'd had better, but he finished it anyway. Even after all these years, after all they'd been through together and apart, he couldn't leave an encounter with Tamar unrattled.

She was running, sometimes daring to look back but mostly she faced ahead, watching for every fallen branch or jutting root that sprung up in her path. She gasped desperately for air as she ran. Sweat and dirt darkened her face and pasted strands of messy black hair to her skin. She rounded a sharp corner, then stumbled and pitched to one side before recovering balance. Before she straightened her shoulder caught on one of the thorn-vines that wound around the high hedges. The barb ripped through the sleeve of her already-battered jacket and drew blood. Pain shot up and down her arm and twisted her face into a wince. Then a chorus of howls rose behind her, tearing her away from her pain, and she found the strength to run deeper into the maze.

As he stood in the watchtower high above the maze, Darth Terrid could feel the young woman's emotions. They bled into the Force: desperation, terror, regret, anger, hate. He knew that brew well; he'd gone through all the same feelings when the Sith had pitched him into this same gnarled hedge-maze all those years ago.

It had been one of Ran'wharn'csapla's first lessons in the power and cruelty of the Sith, so it was for Serissa Lohr. She'd already survived one encounter with a pair of strills and bore the claw-marks and shredded trouser-legs to prove it. Three more of the six-legged canine beasts were on her trail now. Serissa was young and athletic but strills were three times as fast as humans on a straight-away. The hedge maze's winding paths and sharp turns slowed the beasts down and gave the human the illusion of a chance.

When she came to a crossroad in the maze she didn't hesitate to turn left. She couldn't have seen it, but the rightward path reached a

dead-end after only three more turns and would have doomed her. Perhaps it had been luck, or perhaps the Force was feeding her intuition. Terrid glanced sideways at the man next to him on the watchtower. Darth Maleth's eyes were closed as he reached out to speak to the minds of the three pursuing strills. He was the One Sith's masters of battle meditation and projecting feelings of hunger and ferocity to simple beasts was easy for him.

Serissa reached another branch-point and again chose the right path without hesitation. She had a natural talent; the Force spoke to her without her realizing it. Whether she'd be able to consciously draw its power was a different question but it was about to get an answer.

She made her last sharp turn then skidded to a halt. Before her was a simple dead-end. Hedges laced with long thorns rose high on all sides. Breathing hard she spun around as if to run out the way she'd come but the strills bayed again. They'd be on her in seconds and she knew it.

Terrid still vividly remembered how this moment had played out for him. He'd been certain his Sith captors would let the strills tear him apart, flesh ripped off bone by snapping fang-filled jaws, as agonizing a death as he could imagine. He'd felt that brew surge inside him, all the desperation and fear and anger becoming one thing: an all-encompassing need to survive. He'd felt the power in that need and drawn strength from it, no longer caring that he was embracing all his old masers had told him to deny. When the strills had come for him he'd stood his ground and fought them with his hate.

As it had been with him, so it was with her. When the strills rounded the corner into the cul-de-sac she'd braced herself for the attack. The Sith had allowed him a dull-edged vibrosword to defend himself, a shabby imitation of the lightsaber he'd been trained with. To Serissa they'd given a metal pole that she gripped from the center and spun with practiced skill. As a Hapan princess she'd been taught old forms of combat with ceremonial weapons. She had no problem converting them to lethal use and she jabbed the blunt tip forward as hard as she could, low beneath the first strill's

snapping jaws and into its sternum hard enough to crack bone. Strills were tough; the animal backed away but kept on its feet. The other two were on her and Serissa spun her staff to knock both of them back at once. She took one strill in the face but the second ducked low and came for her leg. She jumped back fast, calling on the Force without thinking, but the strill kept coming. She spun her staff out and knocked it away, but the first beast attacked from the side and sunk its teeth into her calf. The girl screamed in pain even as she jammed the butt of the staff down hard, smashing the strill's skull from above. Its six-legged body went limp but its jaws still clung vice-like to her leg, pinning her where she stood.

The other animals leaped. She did her best to knock them back with her staff but they overwhelmed her. One knocked her off-balance; as she fell face-up onto the dirt her leg finally tore free of the dead strill's jaws. She held the staff up in front of her, metal hard against the strill's neck as its jaws snapped hungrily in her face. The second one circled, anxious, ready to join the kill at any moment.

"Enough," Terrid hissed, "Call them off!"

For a long heartbeat Maleth did nothing and the strill's fangs gnashed ever closer to Serissa's pain-twisted face. Then both animals jumped away, turned around, and trotted out of the cul-de-sac, almost casually.

Maleth opened his eyes. "They won't bother her any more."

Terrid knew how this worked. After his turn he'd been left in even worse shape than Serissa, with one leg gnawed to the bone and a torn-open artery in one arm. It had taken a week of bacta treatments for him to even walk.

He looked down at the former Hapan princess. She'd dropped the staff onto her chest and clutched her shaking body by the shoulders as she stared up at Shedua Maad's cloud-darkened sky. She still broadcast everything plainly in the Force, something she'd have to control eventually. Even as pain seared her body thoughts still swarmed in her head: anger at the ones who tortured her, regret at having been stupid enough to seek them out, terror that the strills might come and finish her off. Above everything else was a sense of

defiant triumph. They'd tried to break her. They'd failed. She was growing stronger from her pain and knew it.

When the medical droids arrived for her Terrid turned and followed Maleth down the twisting spiral stairs to the base of the watchtower. Darth Avanc was waiting for them, the hood of his black cloak pulled off his lavender face.

"The machines will take care of her from here," the Keshiri said.

"She acquitted herself well," said Maleth. Like Avanc, he'd been born One Sith and bore the tattoos to prove it. They were long black lines running straight down a pale face framed by long white hair.

"It seems we made the right choice," said Avanc. "Come with me, Darth Terrid. Darth Wyyrlok requires our presence."

He followed Avanc, leaving Maleth behind. There was no point in asking what Lord Krayt's regent and caretaker wanted when he'd find out in moments. He suspected he knew; they'd only spoken about Serissa Lohr once, when Terrid had brought her back from Hapes and requested the responsibility of training her. Since then Wyyrlok and the other senior Sith had stood back, watching, waiting, judging him in everything he did. He wasn't expecting any congratulations for his work so far, but he knew he deserved at least their grudging approval.

They met Wyyrlok in the great high-ceilinged vestibule where the Chagrian Sith Lord usually held court. Beyond the layered blast doors was the chamber where the Dark Lord of the Sith lay in suspended animation, his body slowly healing from damage sustained decades ago. In all his years Terrid had only seen Darth Krayt once. It was the honor granted all Sith Lords on claiming the title. Before then he'd suspected their lord and master was just a legend concocted by Wyyrlok to justify her power, but even lost in dreams Krayt had emanated an unmistakable and terrifyingly powerful aura.

Terrid was surprised to see Darth Kheykid waiting with Wyyrlok. They were an intimidating pair side-by-side, with both of their faces marked up in jagged red and black. The hornless Chagrian was barely half the size of the mighty Barabel assassin but she projected a Force-aura more powerful than any Sith that Terrid

had ever met; more powerful than any Jedi he'd known, save the late Ben Skywalker. She was the second Sith to go by that name and like her father, the original Wyyrlok, she was the voice of Darth Krayt. Her every command carried his authority.

For her fierce visage and terrifying power, Wyyrlok spoke with a calm, soft voice. She spread her hands in greeting and said, "Please, all of you, take a seat."

They settled down on the floor, all four of them. Kheykid's vertical-slit reptilian eyes slipped between Terrid and Avanc and the Chiss realized that they'd called him her for something besides Serissa Lohr.

"I have mediated and consulting with Darth Krayt," Wyyrlok said. Until Terrid had seen the sleeping Dark Lord he'd not believed the Chagrian woman really spoke to him in the Force; now he didn't doubt it. "We have decided something must be done about the threat that has emerged from the Unknown Regions."

Terrid should have seen it coming; he would have if he hadn't been distracted by his new apprentice. "You want me to go out there."

"As a Chiss you know those systems better than any One Sith," Avanc said. It was clear he'd discussed this with Wyyrlok beforehand.

"I was last in the Ascendancy twenty years ago. I'd never left it before then and my knowledge of the surrounding regions was never great."

"Are you objecting?" hissed Kheykid.

Terrid knew there's be no point in that. "I will go where I am sent. I just wanted to clarify. I can't promise miracles."

"You won't be going alone. Darth Kheykid and Darth Avanc will go with you."

Kheykid he'd been expecting. Avanc was more a surprise. Like Wyyrlok, he spent most of his time on Shedua Maad and the One Sith's other hiding-places in the Hapes Cluster. For a senior Sith normally focused on leadership duties to join this expedition bespoke its importance.

"What do we know about this threat?" Terrid looked at the Chagrian. "So far all they've done is savage some Imperials. Why does it concern us?"

"These attackers are dangerous and powerful and we do not control them," said Avanc. "That alone concerns us."

If they knew more they weren't going to tell him now. "Where will we go? The Unknown Regions are vast."

"We can begin by learning all the Chiss know. You can help us with that."

He probably could; with his face unmarked by savage tattoos he would even walk among other Chiss without raising attention, though he'd feel totally foreign all the while.

"What do we *want* from these raiders? Allies?"

"Lord Krayt dreams," Wyyrlok said softly. "He sees a great terror coming out of uncharted space. The attacks on the Imperials are just the beginning."

"Is it a terror we can use against the Jedi?"

"Lord Krayt says.... no."

Terrid glanced at Kheykid and Avanc. The Barabel's reptilian face was unreadable as ever. The Keshiri's was grim and intent. Neither gave anything through the Force.

"So we're to scout and gather information, then come back here?"

"If you think the threat is too great, then yes." Her tone left little doubt that it was.

"Is there anything more we should know about Lord Krayt's dreams?"

"For now, there is nothing to tell. Only that you three will leave tomorrow."

Orders from Krayt and Wyyrlok were beyond appeal. Terrid tried to adjust to the sudden new reality. This dreamed-of threat was concerning, yes, but he found his thoughts kept coming back to Serissa Lohr.

"What of my apprentice?" he asked.

"She will remain on Shedu Maad and continue her training," said Wyyrlok.

"Under whom? Darth Maleth?"

"Do you object to Maleth?"

"Not at all." He chose his next words carefully. "You tasked me to train her. We agreed to it. This mission can be an excellent exercise."

"No," Avanc said. "She's barely been trained so far. She has talent but no control over her powers. We don't even know for sure how strong she is."

"She'll learn much faster on the outside, doing Sith work, than she ever would on Shedu Maad."

"We're already facing an unknown enemy. Doing so with an unknown quantity on our side is asking for disaster."

"This is to be a scouting mission, nothing more. You just said so."

"It could turn into something else at any time. If Lord Krayt is frightened by what's out there—"

"Lord Krayt is *not* afraid," Wyyrlok said warningly.

"You know what I'm saying," Avanc sighed, but Terrid saw indecision on the Chagrian's face and tried to come up with a stronger argument.

To his surprise, Darth Kheykid said, "When I apprenticed to Darth Xoran, I spent more time away from her, doing missions, than training beneath her. I learned more on those missions than any other time."

"You were different," Avanc said. "You were raised as Sith."

"Sith are not Jedi," the Barabel hissed. "We are not made to sit in temples and meditate. We are made to *act*. This princess no hatchling. She is almost an adult by human standards and seems very capable and cunning."

Avanc, outnumbered, scowled but held his tongue. Terrid felt surprising gratitude as Wyyrlok said, "I recognize your argument. I recognize *all* your arguments. And I think this mission is an excellent opportunity to discover what Serissa Lohr is truly made of. Darth Terrid, your apprentice will join you."

Avanc nodded, obedient. He, too, knew not to argue. Still, he said, "She had just finished running the strills. She will take time to heal."

"Not long," Terrid said. "She handled herself well and took only minor wounds."

"Will we take *Intruder*?" asked Kheykid.

"Yes, and you'll make sure it's stocked with medical supplies. For *all* your species." Wyrlokk passed a look over them. "I am sending you four on this mission to serve the Sith, not throw your lives away. Is that understood?"

"Of course," Terrid said firmly and held her red-gold eyes. "We all live to serve."

It seemed like there was never time to mourn. When Ben Skywalker had died Allana had barely been able to make it to his memorial ceremony on Ossus, so carried away she'd been in the political groundswell that had ultimately placed her in charge of the entire Galactic Alliance. She hadn't been able to make it to Jagged Fel's memorial at all, partly because the Imperials had rushed it and also because there was so much else that needed to be done. When the news had come down from Valc VII the Jedi had been scrambling to put together a fact-finding expedition to the Unknown Regions. After the battle everything had been thrown into chaos that was just now calming enough for three teams to be sent out investigating.

Allana had insisted on going. She felt it was the least she could do to stop the beings who'd killed Jag, though it would never be enough. She'd talked to Jaina once since her husband's death. Her aunt was strong, as always, terrifyingly so. Allana wanted to be beside her now, to help the whole Fel family get through this, but as always there just wasn't time to mourn.

She tried to keep her thoughts focused on the task at hand as she sat on the floor in one of the Jedi temple's smaller meetings rooms. A single floor-to-ceiling window looked out on the dusty mountains and plains of Ossus, now tinted red-gold by the afternoon sun. The light that fell though the pane cut across the

floor and shone on the pelts of the two Jedi sitting across from her: Grand Master Lowbacca and the Bothan Master Yaqeel Saa'evtu.

"The information we got from Tamar Skirata will help immensely," Yaqeel was saying. "Those Kaleesh visited four different systems in the Unknown Region that weren't previously in our charts, but with the data from their navcomputer we'll be able to get there easily."

"How much do we know about the planets themselves?" asked Sothais Saar, an older Chev master whose long white hair matched the chalk-colored skin of his face.

"The Kaleesh captain entered basic information into his logs," Yaqeel said. "It looks like they made longer-term stops of more than a standard day at two of the planets. The others were shorter stops, apparently for navigation purposes."

Lowbacca grunted the suggestion that they may have been meeting guides leading them deeper into uncharted space.

"That makes sense," Allana said, "But what are the other two planets? Supply stations? Staging areas?"

"I imagine both," said Rovurn Qel, a leather-faced Weequay. "Of course, there is only one way to be sure."

Lowbacca trilled that they needed to move quickly. There was no telling how the raiders may have changed their supply chains after the battle at Valc VII.

"You're right, but I have another question," said Allana. "What about the Empire? They have the same information we do. Won't they be heading for the same places?"

"All the more imperative we get there first, before trigger-happy Imperials start blasting away anything in sight," said Saar.

"Also, we've still got an open comm line to Bastion," Yaqeel said. "Davek Fel still wants to keep the Jedi involved in this fight. If the Imperials *do* head our way, Arlen or one of the other knights will give us warning."

Lowbacca roared that they should set out by the coming morning. Of the three teams, one each would be going to the two supply planets noted by the Kaleesh.

"Then there's the third team," Qel said. "Grand Master, I volunteer to lead that one."

Lowbacca asked why.

The Weequay's thick brows drew together, wrinkling his forehead more. "We know nothing about the Erath except what the Chiss gave us. We know nothing about their homeworld except its location. This mission will go deepest into uncharted space and there's no telling what we might find. As a member of the Jedi Council, this should be my responsibility."

Lowbacca reminded him that as a Council member his life was all the more important.

Qel shook his head, spilling a few long braids off his shoulder. "We can't lock ourselves in temples and hide from danger. If we won't imitate Ben Skywalker's selfless bravery we don't deserve to be Jedi at all."

It was an argument none of them could counter, but it still cast a grim mood over them. Allana felt conscious that she was the only being in the chamber who hadn't been elevated to a Master's rank. Like her mother and grandmother, the duties of statecraft had taken her away from her Jedi duties too often. Still, the fact that she was included at this meeting was a sign of the esteem and trust the other Jedi held her in, and she felt the need to be worthy of it.

"Master Qel," she said, "I'd like to accompany your team to the Erath homeworld."

She could sense surprise from Yaqeel and misgivings from Lowbacca, but the stern Weequay simply nodded. "I'd be glad to have you with us."

It was easy to divide the rest of the mission from there. Masters Saav'etu and Saar were the other team leaders and they spent another ten minutes hashing out which Jedi knights would join which group. When Lowbacca admitted that his daughter Rollranarra had expressed the desire to go to the Erath homeworld Allana was glad to have her along, though she was disappointed when Saar chose Jodram Tainer for his group.

By the time the group split up the light outside the window had turned the dark wine-color of twilight. As the other Masters rose to

leave Lowbacca stayed cross-legged on the floor, thinking. Allana lingered instead of stepping through the door. The Wookiee was a powerful Jedi, good at hiding his emotions, but his anxiety for his daughter still seeped through.

"You made the right choice," Allana told him. "I know you did."

Lowbacca groaned a question.

"I know a thing or two about parents being very protective of their children. In the end you have to trust them and let them risk themselves. It's what Ben did."

The Wookiee gave a low whimper. He'd never been happy with how he'd gotten his position.

"Rollra will be fine," Allana insisted. "Trust me. I'll watch her back the whole way."

He nodded his shaggy head and roared.

"No, I haven't told my mother yet. But she'll be fine too."

It was mostly true. Tenel Ka had accepted a long time ago the dangers Allana would go through. The former Hapan queen was living on Dathomir now, giving lessons to select young Jedi Knights and Witches. Time had finally taken away the warrior's physical prowess she'd always prided herself on, but she could still pass on what she'd learned, and Allana knew that her mother had found a peace with things at the end. Still, it ached in her sometimes to look at her mother and see the toll years had taken, now closer to the end she was than the beginning.

Allana looked at Lowbacca again. The Wookiee and her mother- as well as Jaina and her father- had trained together at Luke Skywalker's academy on Yavin 4. They'd been friends since adolescence. Jaina and Tenel Ka were old women but thanks to his species' long lifespan, Lowbacca was still a Wookiee in his prime, without a strand of visible gray in his red-and-brown pelt. Even Allana, on the downward slope of middle age, could tell her body didn't move quite as fast as it used to.

Lowbacca asked why she was staring at him.

She gave him a melancholy smile. "Nothing to worry about, Master. Just a little envy."

Then she turned, stepped out of the chamber, and hurried down the hall. If they were to go in the morning there was still a lot of work to do.

It had been a long time since Jodram had seen night on Ossus. Through the window of his cabin in the guest habitat wing he could see the stars shining faintly behind the Chron Drift's luminous gases. One full moon shone in the Drift, bright and white against the dim rainbow curtain.

No second moon, not that he could see. Nights when both moons were full in the sky had always been special. Jade had always insisted on going to meditate out into the hills, where there was nothing but cold wind between them and the cosmos. Her mother Katia had died when both moons were out, and those nights had been beautiful and sad at once.

Jodram didn't want to wash the stars away, so he kept the lights off in his cabin as he patched into the Temple's communications system and sent a hail out to Fengrine. He and Jade had agreed on this precise moment to call and synchronized their chronometers so there could be no mistake. When his hail reached the communication station he knew that his wife would be there to receive it.

He was expecting to see Jade's face and looking forward to it, but when the holo sprung to life he found himself looking at not once face but three. Even through the blur of the blue holo-image he could see the quiet curiosity on Kol's and the restlessness on Nat's.

"You brought them all," Jodram observed, stupidly.

"I decided to make it a day on the town," Jade pulled the boys a little closer. "It's just before noon here."

"I remember. Nat? Kol? How are you two holding up?"

Kol just nodded. Nat asked, "How long will you be gone, Dad?"

"I can't say for sure. Days, maybe weeks, but I'll send you a message as soon as I get back to Ossus."

"Be careful, Dad," said Nat. "It's dangerous."

"Believe me, I won't forget."

He looked at Jade as he said it. Their arguments over who'd go on this mission had veered close to an actual fight. Jade had insisted she owed it to Jagged Fel, a member of her family who she'd respected very much. Jodram had insisted that was all the more reason to stay with their sons and raise them right, as Jag had his. She'd finally, grudgingly accepted, and there'd been a certain coolness in their parting. That awkwardness seemed past now; even through the holo-transmission he could feel her affection, and her gratitude for taking on this mission so she could be with Nat and Kol.

"Are you going to be on the same team as Allana?" Jade asked as she shifted Kol onto her lap.

Jodram shook his head. "She ended up with Master Qel. I'll be going with Master Saar."

"What are you going to be *doing*, though?" asked Nat.

"Scouting. Making contacts. Figure out exactly who'd behind this whole mess. We have intel from the Imperials and the Chiss. We're are prepared as we could possibly be."

Nat nodded like he was satisfied. "May the Force be with you, Dad."

He sounded so serious as he said it, but he was still just a child. Jodram smirked a little and said, "Thanks. The Force will be with you too. Just be patient and do whatever your mother says. I'll be back home before you know it."

"I'll make sure they contain themselves," Jade squeezed Nat's shoulder. "Say goodbye to your dad before he signs off, Kol."

The boy blinked big eyes and said, "Goodbye, Dad."

"Goodbye to you too." He searched his wife's face and silently asked if she wanted to send the kids away and spare a few words in private, but she gave no indicated. She seemed to feel that all they needed to say they could say right now, as a family, all four of them. That was just fine by him.

"May the Force be with you, Jodram," his wife said. "I'll see you on the other side."

"I'm looking forward to it already," he said and reached for the controls. "Over and out."

And with the tap of a button the connection died. The blue holo winked to nothing and he was alone in a dark empty room. He looked out the window and felt his eyes adjust to the sudden darkness. More and more stars resolved from beneath the veil.

He felt chilled for a reason he couldn't place, then shook it off as jitters. The Unknown Regions promised all kinds of potential dangers but he wasn't going alone. The most capable Jedi in the Order were being sent and he was proud to be among their number. He still wished this didn't have to be done. He ached now more than ever to be back on Fengrine with Jade and their sons. For a long time Ossus had been his home, and he'd never felt more comfortable than under these dust-shrouded stars. Staring at them now he felt like he was staring at a memory, surprisingly vivid but ultimately fleeting. His real life was elsewhere. One day soon he would go back to it. The thought gave him confidence, and it carried him into the last safe night's sleep he'd have for the immediate future.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was a truism, bordering on cliché, that no battle plan long survived contact with the enemy. When reports starting coming in from Parshoone, Ansion, Marquarra and Alashan, Davek realized even that was optimistic. Before they'd even been able to launch their second thrust into the Unknown Regions, the enemy had struck again.

Word came down as he was returning to Ord Thoden from Bastion. One-third of the Fourth Fleet was still mustered at the border planet, putting its orbital repair facilities to full use while the other two-thirds of the Fighting Fourth was scattered across the border systems for their protection. The moment his shuttle set down on the *Afsheen Makati*, Davek was swamped with reports from ships that had engaged the enemy and requests for face-to-face conversation.

He did his best to comply, but first he reviewed all the battle reports. These had been fast hit-and-run attacks, none of them as powerful or deadly as the one that had killed his father, but as with Valc VII, the enemy had forgone any pretense of piracy or pillage and focused simply of destroying everything in sight.

As a result, the reports made for grim reading. The lead star destroyer defending Parshoone had been crippled beyond repair,

with a reported casual rate of over fifty percent. The task force at Alashan had turned back the enemy at the expense of two *Dart*-class gunships and one *Kontos*-class frigate lost with all hands. In addition the *Predator*-class destroyer leading the complement had taken heavy damage and was even now limping back to safety with heavy casualties aboard. Ord Thoden wouldn't be able to accommodate its needs, which meant it would have to fall back to more extensive facilities. Admiral Grave's Second Fleet was still staging at Yaga Minor, which meant they'd have to fall back to Bilbringi. After reading more reports, Davek saw that two more frigates from Marquarra would need heavy repairs.

This wave of attacks had come swiftly and been repulsed just as fast. That should have made Davek feel better but it didn't; there was no telling when or where the enemy would strike next. He passed on all the battle reports to Admiral Grave, then set on contacting the captains who'd requested a word.

First in line was the main defender at Marquarra, the potent *Compellor*-class destroyer *Tempest* under the command of Vice Admiral Farl Renwar. Aside from being one of the Fourth's senior commanders she was a Voidwalker as well, his communications lieutenant turned first officer. Seventeen years and a lot of responsibilities had visibly aged her, adding streaks of grey to her bronze hair and lines to her face, but Davek knew how that went.

After Renwar gave a verbal summary of the report Davek had already read she asked, "I haven't been able to get a response from Bilbringi yet. How long do you think it will take for my frigates to get repaired?"

"I'm not sure, but Captain Klovis needs full repairs on her destroyer, and that will take priority."

"I thought Admiral Mears moved his ships out to clear the yards?"

Most of the Third Fleet had been shuffled out of Bilbringi to patrol Imperial worlds away from the border. They weren't prepared to muster a full defense yet but their twin goals had been to reassure a frightened populace and to leave yards empty for Fourth Fleet ships needing repairs.

"I'll pass word on to Jaeger and make sure he does everything he can," Davek said. Another Voidwalker, former helm chief Devlin Jaeger was in charge of operations at the Bilbringi yards.

Renwar nodded. "I appreciate that."

"Still," Davek sighed, "I can't promise miracles. I'm going to start reapportioning battle groups on the assumption that we've got at least two destroyers and support ships out of commission."

"Two destroyers?"

"The *Legation* went down at Parshoone. Captain Healy was killed in action."

Renwar sighed. Best he knew she and Healy hadn't been close, but losing another destroyer captain after Verdon, Meleti, and Por Dun was a heavy blow. She asked, "When is the Second going to start throwing its weight around?"

"Grave was going to start mustering ships out toward the border today."

"Then he'd better hurry."

"I'm sure he will."

"I look forward to seeing him in action," Renwar said, sincere but also dry. Grave had risen to fleet admirals thanks to high scores in battle simulations and political connections. Davek wasn't the only one who wondered how he'd fare in a large and real combat situation.

"When you get to Ord Thoden we'll give your ship a look-over and make any repairs necessary," Davek told her. "Be ready for a quick turn-around."

"Are we still planning to go ahead with the offensive?"

"We're not going to let them throw us off-balance. We'll make a few adjustments, that's all."

"Glad to hear it. Thank you, sir. Anything else?"

"Not right now. I'll see you soon, Farl."

She snapped a salute and the holo died. Davek ran down the list after that, speaking with the other captains who's repulsed the latest enemy strikes. At the bottom of the list was a captain who hadn't. Captain Korak's *Nightwatch* had been stationed at Cantras Gola and

thankfully missed the latest round, so it was with curiosity that he sent a responding hail to his former tactical ensign.

"I'm sorry if this was a bother, sir," Korak began. "I know you have a lot on your plate."

"It's no bother at all," Davek said, though in truth he wanted nothing more than a nap right now. "What did you need to talk about?"

"It's not about the new raids, so if you still have to deal with those—"

"I've done that." In addition to tired he was getting annoyed, but also curious. "What is it?"

Korak breathed deep. "I assume you've been in steady contact with Darakon and Avaris?"

"Of course."

"Then I have to ask, sir... And I mean no offense if you *didn't*, but did you talk to them about Por Dun?"

He should have seen this coming. Weariness was getting to him. "Yes. I brought it up with them both."

"I noticed she didn't make a statement."

"Fleet Command put out a declassified report on Valc VII. To anyone who reads it, it will be quite clear that Por Dun performed her duty bravely and that she was guilty of neither treason nor cowardice. Quite the contrary, we have her to thank for the capture of the Kaleesh frigate."

"And who's going to bother to actually *read* it?"

Davek sighed. This was turning into his conversation with Avaris in reverse. He'd insisted that Fleet Command or the Head of State's office issue a formal statement clearing Por Dun of the rumors that had been swirling since Moff Veers' INN interview. Avaris had said it was beneath her office to go around correcting gossip and that anyone who cared to know could easily find the truth.

But in the end, repeating malicious rumor was much easier than digging for facts. Avaris had refrained from a statement to avoid putting herself in opposition to Veers and his allies. Davek was still angry about it; Korak seemed even more upset, which

wasn't surprising. He and Por Dun had been friends for almost twenty years.

"I'm sorry, Benion. I wish there was more I could do, but there isn't right now."

"People are still calling her a traitor, even people in the military. It isn't right. You know what happened at Karfeddion. If she hadn't figured out how to escape we'd have all died back there. Every last Voidwalker."

"And know. And I promise we'll rectify it one day. But right now I have to defend the Empire."

It came out angrier than intended, but Korak looked cowed. He nodded sullenly and asked, "Understood, sir. Should I hold position at Cantras Gola?"

"Please do. If anything in the battle plan changes you'll get it through normal channels."

"I'll be on the lookout."

They exchanged short salutes and Davek killed the holo. That was it: reports read, calls made. His cabin aboard the *Makati* was bigger than anything he'd had before and it felt like a long march to his bedroom. Without removing his boots or uniform jacket he let himself fall face-up on the soft cushions and close his eyes.

The days since his father's death still seemed a dreamlike blur. He'd been so busy that it hadn't fully hit him. It was only in moment like this, rare moments when he was neither at work nor passed out from exhaustion that the enormity of it really hit him. His father, Jagged Fel, the man who's raised him and guided him and in many ways been the center of his life, was gone. He'd heard it said that no child can truly grow up until his parent dies and he steps outside his father's shadow. Maybe that was happening now; maybe it was only of those things people said, a hollow slogan. He had a feeling he'd find out only in retrospect.

The comlink clipped to his chest buzzed. He fumbled for it and flicked it on.

"This is the admiral."

"Another battle report, sir. The raiders are attacking Tovarskl."

Davek heaved a heavy sigh and sat upright on his bed. "Understood. I'll be right up."

Given that over two million beings made up the regular population at the Bilbringi shipyards, the orbit station had a variety of recreational facilities for singles and family members of all ages. Since the populace slanted toward serving military members there was a particular proliferation of bars and cantinas, and since Homs Malkin's arrival at the yards, Lukas Briggs had made it a mission to introduce his old sergeant to his favorites.

The Rimwalker was one of those standbys. It was a good middle ground for mid-ranking groundpounders in middle age: neither cheap and dirty like the stormtrooper hangouts of old, and nowhere near as posh as Navy officer's clubs. The mood, unfortunately, wasn't what it used to be. Valc VII had been bad enough, but the new wave of attacks was further dampening people's spirits. Lukas himself had just gone off-shift after working late to reconfigure supply chains for the incoming Fourth Fleet ships in need of repair. The attack on Tovarskl had sent another star destroyer their way, *Predator*-class. Everyone was waiting for word of the next one.

"It will get better once the Second goes into action," Lukas told Malkin as they hunched over the bar-counter.

"It had better," the other man said. Despite the gray in his beard the former sergeant was still a big, fit, strong man. "I've heard good things about the admiral. No disrespecting Prince Fel, but I think Grave could be the one to really turn the tables, you know?"

Lukas nodded after a moment. 'Prince Fel' was what they'd called him back on *Voidwalker*, when he'd been just a tactical lieutenant before the Senex-Juvex mess happened. It had been mildly derisive more often than not, and it had been years since he'd heard anyone use it.

"Any chance your regiment could get shipped out to fight?" he asked Malkin.

The bearded man shook his head. "We just got here, remember?"

"Obviously. But if they need a lot of groundpounders, say, for a planetary occupation?"

"The troops with the Fourth will handle that. But you're right, we may get rotated out." He shrugged broad shoulders. "Who can say? We don't now a damn thing about the aliens attacking us. That's the scary part."

"They're still a long way from Bilbringi," Lukas said, half to assure himself.

"For now. The bastards move fast," Malkin grunted and took a gulp of ale. "How are the kids handling it?"

"Polaw's getting nervous but he's trying to hide it. Leena's the one who keeps asking question, which I wouldn't mind, except I have no idea how to answer them. Except I can't tell *her* that because I'm her dad and I'm supposed to know everything." He sighed.

"Sounds fun."

"You're missing out. Not too late to fix that."

"No. Married to the service, that's me." Malkin shrugged again. "There's worse ways to live a life."

"Well as long as we *keep* living it."

"Come on, don't get damn mopey." Malkin nudged his shoulder. "Once Grave gets into the action we'll start to see a real change. *Really* take the fight to the enemy."

Lukas took a gulp from his mug and tried to feel assured. The ale helped a little. In retrospect things had been simpler back on *Voidwalker*. Terrifying as it had been, it had all been about survival. Now he was older and had responsibilities piled up: to the Empire, to the shipyards, most of all to his family. If the crisis worsened and Bilbingi itself those responsibilities might come into conflict. He'd pick his family over his job and day. He'd admitted that to himself long ago, and for just as long he'd dreaded the day when he might have to act on that choice.

"You ever get...." He began, then trailed off.

"What?" prodded Malkin.

"Nostalgic?"

"For what?"

"For how things were... before."

The older man narrowed his eyes. "Are you talking about *Voidwalker*?"

"No. Well, yes. That whole time... it was simpler. You knew what had to be done."

"Did we? Best I can remember we all followed orders and prayed Prince Fel knew what the hell he was doing."

"He did."

"Maybe. Or maybe we got lucky. We got close to the end back there, over and over. That fact that we *did* make it out—"

"Is a miracle, I know," Lukas said grimly. Even after so much time he could still remember all the people in Razor Company they'd lost, and the dead far outnumbered the living. "Maybe it is just nostalgia. But things seem like they were... clearer, then. Do you know what I mean?"

Malkin thought about that for a long moment, swallowed a mouthful more ale, and said, "No, I don't. I know exactly what I need to do."

His matter-of-face tone made Lukas chuckle. "Well, good for you, I guess. Maybe one day you'll have to share that with me."

"Maybe I will. But not tonight." Malkin finished the last half-mouthful at the bottom of his glass. "Want another? Next round's on me."

Lukas glanced at his chrono. These nights out with the old sarge were getting later and later, and his wife had commented on it last time. After a day like today, as grueling as it was distressing, Lukas figured he deserved one more drink. And Malkin *was* paying.

"Count me in," he said with a smile. His old sarge raised a big hand and told the server to keep the drinks coming.

In his younger days, Arlen had had difficulty standing still. His mother had commented a few times, always with a wry smile, that he took a little after his grandfather Han with his restless need to be out in the galaxy, doing things, finding adventure. Naturally Arlen had taken it as a compliment, and a soft encouragement to keep

going out into the galaxy, doing things most other Jedi- especially Imperial Jedi- did not.

It had been a comment from his father that had altered his view of things. He didn't remember exactly when it was- after Senex-Juvex, after he'd met Tamar, probably before Marin came into the picture- Jagged Fel had told him that who he really resembled was his mother. Young Jaina Solo had wanted to be at the forefront of everything, going places and doing things, but at her core she'd never doubted her fate lay with the Jedi Order. Time, responsibilities, and heavy burdens had gradually weighted Jaina's life; Arlen had gone through nowhere near what his mother had but he'd reached the point in his life where he looked back and wondered where the adventure had gone. It had been happening even before his father's death, but that tragedy- and all the problems assailing the Empire- was making that weight feel omnipresent.

To get a little relief he fell back on hold habits, with new twists. He'd been tinkering with *Starlight Champion* for twenty years now and he'd been gradually teaching his daughter the ins and outs of the now-very-customized Koensayr *Lightskimmer*-class scout ship. Tweaking the insides of a starship was rarely simple but it *was* straightforward; the machinery either worked or it didn't and it was easy to find out which. As was often the case, Vitor tagged along. He and Marin were under the ship's nose and had just opened up the forward sensor package when Arlen's personal comlink went off, telling him a hail was coming through to *Champion's* main transmitter.

"Who is it?" asked Marin as she hopped off the short ladder she'd climbed to reach the overhang.

"Don't know." Arlen thumbed the 'link to standby. "Let's take a look. Vitor, hold out here. Go through that supply kit and see if you can't find a set of stem bolts."

Father and daughter clambered up the landing ramp and into the ship. Arlen dropped into the co-pilot's seat and Marin into the pilot's chair her dad never let her sit in while the ship was running.

When Arlen turned on the transmission a blue holo-image, one-quarter size, appeared, showing a familiar smiling face.

"Well, well," Chance Calrissian grinned. "Family bonding time?"

Marin rolled her eyes, but Arlen said, "You could say that. How's Brenna and Chareth?"

"On vacation to Rathalay, actually."

"And you're not with them?"

"Oh, you know me, I'm in love with my work." Chance winked. "Don't tell them that, though."

"I'll be sure to." Arlen crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought your partnership with good old Volgma would have opened up a little free time."

"I wish. The opposite, really. He's the most workaholic Hutt I've ever met. All he ever wants to talk about is the company."

"Do you know a lot of Hutts?" asked Marin.

"Only slightly more than your dad." Chance's smile finally wilted. They hadn't talked since Valc VII; familiar banter only went so far and they all knew what had to be said. "I'm sorry I haven't commed 'til now. I really *have* been busy."

"It's not a problem," Arlen said. "So have we."

"You know I'm sorry about what happened. If I can do anything about these raiders, anything to help the Jedi order the Empire—"

"I know," Arlen smiled weakly. "And we do appreciate it."

Chance sighed. With that classic Calrissian smile gone he was starting to look his age. Though the holo mostly hid it, patches of gray had been sneaking into his black curls and dark lines deepened on his face. He was the better part of a decade older than Arlen, already in his fifties. As children he'd been an older brother of sorts, showing Arlen sides of the galaxy nobody on Bastion talked about. As an adult he'd been a friend good enough to follow Arlen into the deepest danger. Now they'd gotten older; both men had daughters and Chance still had a wife. Arlen had his Jedi duties and Chance had his corporation; both were, in a sense, inheritances from their parents. Talking to Chance always brought memories of the freer days, and the melancholy that came with remembering.

Chance glanced at Marin. "How you holding up, kid?"

"I'm okay. Considering."

"Yeah." He looked back to Arlen. "Any word on when you're gonna take the fight to those raiders? Or can you not tell me?"

"I don't know anything *to* tell," Arlen said, which was mostly true. "The Jedi are sending search teams. Davek and the military are doing their thing."

"And you?"

A part of Arlen had wanted to rush off with Allana, Jodram, and the others into the Unknown Regions, but as one of the senior Masters on Bastion he knew he had a duty here. "When I'm needed, I'll be there," he said.

"Well if you need help in anything, anything at all—"

"What? You'll run off and leave the company to Volgma?"

"He wishes. But as you've reminded me more than once, I do have some unique connections, so if you think any of those might help—"

"I will keep your disgustingly rich friends in mind, but I don't think they can help us against unknown alien invaders. But thanks for the offer."

"You're welcome." Chance looked back at Marin. "Take care of your dad, kid. Don't let him do anything too crazy."

"I'll try," she said.

"That's the spirit. If there's nothing else, I guess I can check in later."

"We'll look forward to it. Thanks for the call, Chance. We appreciate it. Really."

"Least I could do. Be strong."

When the holo winked off Arlen realized he had a small soft glow inside of him. Months passed without him talking to Chance nowadays; it had been over a standard year since they'd met in-person. That was the toll of getting old and having responsibilities, but at least he had warm memories that would never leave.

"Hey, Dad," Marin prodded, "Think Vitor's getting lonely down there?"

"He just might." Arlen pushed himself off the chair. "Lead the way."

She left the pilot's seat with a little reluctance, then hurried out of the cockpit. He wondered what things would be like for Vitor and Marin years from now; whether they'd still be close as siblings or whether their lives would diverge so they'd only see each other every few years. Even then they'd still have memories. That would still be something, a mark of how good things had been.

Marin couldn't understand that, not yet. He hoped that time for her was a long way off. Stifling a little sigh of his own, he followed her out of the ship.

Damien Corde liked to think of himself as a well-traveled man who'd seen more worlds inside Imperial Space and out than almost anyone he knew. In the course of his travels he'd heard of a shadowport called Broken Moon, located presumably inside some orbiting body that had been broken by collision with another chunk of space-rock. There were thousands, if not millions of broken moons across the galaxy and the location of this specific one seemed to be a rather guarded secret. He'd never doubted that, if he decided to use his talents, he could discover the system and planet where the shadowport was located, but there'd never been the need. He'd certainly never suspected that he'd get its location handed to him on a datacard from Moff Veers, nor that he'd fly off to the Tolomen System for a rendezvous with his Mandalorian contact. But just as intelligence work abounded with ironies, it was full of surprises too.

Access to the shadowport located inside the airless, smashed-open moon was apparently invite-only, and Damien was lucky to be on the list. He didn't know exactly how, but Veers had swung it. He was traveling under an alias, of course, but it still disconcerted him. He'd have preferred to meet someplace where he wouldn't be noticed at all, but the Mandalorians had insisted.

He was especially wary after he set his ship- now responding to *Waste Away*- and walked out into the hangar. He'd had to navigate several twisted tunnels into the guts of the moon to get here and knew getting out would be tricky. Nobody asked for identification or checked him for weapons, which was a mild relief. In addition to

the BlasTech holstered at his hip he also had a Czerka hold-out strapped to his calf and a throwable knife in his right sleeve. He didn't want to have to use any of them but preparation was key.

Veers had included a brief history on Broken Moon, which made for mildly entertaining reading material on the way here. It had first been used twenty years ago by a crime boss named Modran Krux, who'd broken off from a Hutt syndicate and gotten rich selling glitterstim. He'd been murdered during the Senex-Juvex Crisis; reports varied as to whether the Jedi or an underling was responsible. After a good five years of chaos the place had reestablished itself as a shadowport. The new owner, a former employee of Krux, was more into selling information than spice and liked to keep a lower profile.

He navigated the winding rock-bored tunnels, following pedestrians and the sound of music to what he guessed was the shadowport's hub. When he reached it, it wasn't what he'd expected. Reminiscent of a throne room in a Hutt's palace, the broad domed space had an open floor in the center where a trio of human males performed a series of acrobatic dances. They weren't wearing much and they had the kind of physiques Damien wished he'd had at twenty and knew he'd never get at his age. His eyes drifted to the dais on the far side from the entrance. Sitting enthroned, sipping from a glass of something proffered by a pink-skinned Zeltron servant, was a very attractive Twi'lek woman with blue lekku draped over her shoulders and a gown of opaque shimmerhilk over her body. They were a far distance apart but for a moment it felt like her eyes met his across the room.

Damien turned away and found the nearest of several oval-shaped counters from which various drinks were being served. As Veers had instructed him too, he ordered a cocktail called a Serenno Surprise. Damien had never heard of it before and the bartender, a hulking Herglic, blinked tiny eyes in surprise and had to look up how to concoct the thing.

Once it was made, Damien took the drink to a small table at the edge of the chamber. It was milky-white in the glass and had a good smell to it. The dance show was still going on and while it didn't

play to his taste, he admired the young men for their endurance and athleticism. He kept his head down and scanned the crowd. It was a mix of humans and aliens, more the latter than the former, either in small clusters or keeping to themselves. He didn't spot any armored Mandalorians and they were typically hard to miss. Idly, he took a first sip of his fragrant Serenno Surprise. It tasted so foul he almost spat it out onto the table.

"That's why they call it a surprise," grunted a voice over his shoulder.

Damien was too professional to jump in surprise; he slowly and steadily looked back, letting one hand slide under the table to his holstered gun. The creature looking down on him had a brown face with dog-like jowls peeling back to show hints of sharp white teeth. It was even uglier than most aliens but in the back of his mind he recalled the species: Kerestian. The ambitious generally became assassins or bounty-hunters, the rest low-life thugs if they left their primitive homeworld at all, which most didn't.

"I just thought I'd give it a try," Damien said curtly. "Next time I'll know better."

The alien stepped round to the other side of the table but didn't drop into the opposite seat. "What's your business here, friend?"

"None of yours."

"You look like you're waiting for someone."

"Actually, I was enjoying the show." He gestured to the floor but the dancers were bowing out.

"Just an observation," the Kerestian said. "Sit here forever and you'll waste away."

Damien felt a fool. He'd been instructed to order the drink, have a seat, and wait for someone to name-drop his ship ID and join him. He'd been expecting either a Mandalorian in full *beskar* armor or a tough-looking human temporarily outside his suit. He'd known, intellectually, that there were non-human Mandalorians but he'd never expected one. Old Imperial assumptions created blind spots.

"Maybe you can keep me company," Damien said, and the Kerestian dropped into the chair. Still keeping a hand near his gun,

he leaned over the table and asked, "Do we get these performances often or am I just lucky?"

"Often enough, but they need a break for now." The Kerestian glanced at the throne, where the Twi'lek woman was speaking quietly with a tall black-robed Anx who must have been a majordomo.

"So," Damien said, almost conversational, "Do you have a name?"

"Call me Galaset. What should I call you?"

"I think you know already. Starts with Halcyon."

"Ends with Blackmor," the Kerestian nodded.

Damien wondered what else Veers had shared besides his false name. "You've been in contact with my employer."

"My employer has. I'm just his messenger."

"And how does your employer have an arrangement with this, ah..."

"Her name is Sherev'ath and to her I'm just a being who gets goods from place to place with no problems and no questions."

"That explains something. Frankly, I was expecting someone in different attire."

"I'm still Mandalorian," Galaset said quietly. "Even when I'm not fully dressed."

"I was told I'd meet with someone who'd speak with the authority of the *Mand'alor*. Is that you?"

"It is."

Damien was good at spotting lies, at least from humans. He knew all the tells: the slight pauses, the evasive eyes, the subtly upward intonation. Aliens were much harder; he'd never met a Kerestian in his life. Still, his gut told him this Galaset was on the level.

"I need to hire your services. I'm very willing to pay the price."

"What kind of services?"

They leaned close across the table. He said, "I need a team to hijack several ships, then use them in a combat situation."

"What kind of ships?"

"Medium-sized capital ships. I have all the technical specifications on my person. I'll share them fully with your people."

"What *kind*?"

"Vagaari."

The alien blinked his small gold eyes. "The target?"

He'd planned the evade that question for now and focus on the hijacking, but the Kerestian had an intent and predatory gaze. Damien's gut told him he wouldn't leave until he'd said it. "The Chiss Ascendancy. Not a major assault, but enough to leave a mark."

Galaset blinked again. Something shifted in his face; he understood what was being asked and all the potential ramifications. Damien didn't believe all aliens were stupid; far from it, he'd known some which were dangerously clever. This one seemed to be the latter, which made him even less trustworthy.

"I'll give you all the information I have," he said. "And I will let your people run the mission your way. However, my employer wants me to remain with your people and observe."

"You don't trust us?" Galaset peeled his jowls back a little. Maybe it was his imitation of a human's grin.

"There are details that have to be exactly right. Otherwise the entire mission is a wash."

The alien nodded; he understood exactly what this was about. Damien hated being transparent. "And if at any stage this mission becomes, as you say, a wash?"

"Then you won't get full payment."

"We won't take on this mission unless there's *some* guarantee of payment."

"I've been authorized to release portion of credits to you in stages."

"When and how much?"

Damien allowed a little smile of his own. "I've also been authorized to negotiate this in part in full. Assuming you're still interested, because if you sign up for one stage you sign up for them all."

"We're not afraid to take jobs, and we finish the ones we start," Galaset said. Professional pride, good. It was finally something they had in common. This relationship just might work after all.

As another group of dancers took the floor, they moved onto haggling.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was a pattern Marin Fel had never liked but which she'd long gotten used to: when one parent left, the other one made themselves scarce. The vast majority of the time this meant her mother stopped by Bastion while her father was away. Normally she was okay with it, but now that her father had joined Marasiah and a bunch of other Jedi in the Imperial fleet, ready to fight who-knew-what unknown enemy that had killed her grandfather, it was hard not to worry.

Her mother seemed to be making a concentrated effort to get her out of it. Tamar Skirata was a tall woman, almost as high as Arlen and a full head above her fourteen-year-old daughter. Nonetheless, Tamar insisted they practice sparring. No lightsabers this time. Mother and daughter went out on the padded floor in nothing besides soft white tunics and practiced hand-to-hand. It was very different from the lightsaber duels she'd blocked out with Vitor and a few of the other apprentices. Here she had to grapple with a partner who was bigger and stronger than her, one who wasn't afraid to make her hurt even if Marin knew her mother would never deal serious damage. A fight wasn't real without hurt, Tamar had told her, and all this wrestling on padded floors was

practice for the day she'd have to fight a bigger, stronger enemy who really wanted her dead.

They did this whenever Tamar stopped by the academy so Marin wasn't totally useless in it, just rusty. She'd figured out a little while ago that her mother found this kind of thing- the struggle, the sweat, the single-minded exertion- easier than most other kinds of interaction. It was easier for Marin too. The difficult times always came during meals together and long quiet mornings. Then they had nothing to do but wonder what each did in the other's absence.

She knew her mother was still in contact with her *other* family on Mandalore. It was Marin's family too but she'd never asked to see them. She'd trained as a Jedi from birth and Mandalorians weren't typically fond of those, even if the Skiratas (so her mother had said) weren't ordinary Mandos. Marin might not have had Vitor's natural talent with the Force but she still had no doubt what she wanted to become. The knowledge of the other half of her family had always been a nagging distraction, one she did best to put from her mind whenever her mother wasn't around.

After a few hours of sparring Marin was left with aching muscles that would last until she lay down for sleep. After they'd changed back into cleaner clothes her mother noticed her hooking new lightsaber to her belt.

"Did you build that yourself?" asked Tamar.

"Dad helped." Marin looked down at it: a straight silver cylinder with black handgrips, plain but functional.

"Can I see it?"

There was something serious and respectful in her tone, like she was talking to an adult. Marin handed it to her. Tamar thumbed the trigger; yellow light shot up and she waved the blade through the air.

"It's balanced well," she said. "Have you practiced much with it?"

"Some. Nothing too.... You know, dangerous."

Tamar shut it off and handed it back. Marin remembered that Mandalorian children were considered adults at age fourteen. "When did your grandfather give you your lightsaber?"

"Even younger. But I didn't practice with it as much as you."

"Do you still have it?"

"It's in the ship."

With her *beskar'gam*, no doubt. Marin wondered how much her mother used either. She was stuck in a place where she could be neither Mandalorian nor Jedi, and while she kept her frustration hidden most of the time, it showed through occasionally.

As Marin put it back on her belt her mother said, "It's good what you're doing. I'm proud of you. You've taken another step to something more."

There was a warmth to her voice, but to Marin it sounded hollow. She could never figure out what her mother wanted for it; she could never figure out what Tamar Skirata wanted for herself. Sometimes she even wondered if her mother knew either. That was why these visits were always so awkward. Marin didn't *dislike* seeing her mother, she just didn't know what to *do* with her.

She felt something in the Force, a stirring in the familiar link she shared with Vitor. He was alarmed by something; at the same time he seemed to be beckoning her to join him.

Tamar noticed her daughter's face. "What is it?"

"I don't know." Marin pulled her hair into a tail at the back of her neck. "It's Vitor. I think he wants me to come."

Tamar let her daughter lead the way through the insides of the academy. Marin felt herself being pulled toward the place where Vitor was; as she trekked the halls and rode the turbolifts she realized he must have been at the main recreational lounge space.

With so many Jedi away with Davek's fleet, the academy's halls and chambers felt weirdly empty. When she found Vitor he was with his grandmother; his little brother was nowhere to be seen. Both Vitor and Jaina were sitting on a red sofa facing the holo-projector that beamed out the face of an INN newscaster. Even before listening to what he said Marin tracked the words scrolling beneath him: Fighting underway at Kalee; Fourth Fleet responds.

"The spark of the fighting is uncertain at this time," said the broadcaster. "All we know for certain is that the interdiction cruiser *Harbinger* has been destroyed, apparently with all hands. How the

aliens managed this is uncertain, but elements from the Fourth have been quick to respond and we understand more ships are on their way."

Though he was surely secure at Bastion or another world, the image over his shoulder must have been from an Imperial warship orbiting the Kaleesh homeworld. It showed flashes of explosions over the blue and green curve of the planet's surface. As Marin watched a trio of big star destroyers reverted to realspace and immediately began firing. She wasn't an expert on military hardware but she marked one ship, with blunted mandibles for a bow instead of a typical wedge-point, to be a fleet carrier. The bigger ship at the center of the formation could only be her uncle's flagship, the *Afsheen Makati*.

Sure enough, the broadcaster said, "As our audience can see from the live feed, more elements from the Fourth have just arrived. That appears to be Admiral Fel's ship, the *Makati*. They're deploying fighters now..."

"The Kaleesh home fleet can't have that many ships," Vitor said as he watched intently. "He should be able to handle them easily."

"Knocking them out of orbit is the easy part." Tamar crossed her arms over her chest. "Pacifying a planet like that isn't going to be easy. The Kaleesh are warriors."

"This shouldn't be happening at all," Jaina said. The lines looked heavier than ever on her face.

The camera-view on the broadcast shifted but the INN presenter went on, saying, "As you can see, our fleet is deploying to encircle the Kaleesh flagship. It's the head of their local defense fleet, quite *small* compared to a typical star destroyer. We're being told it's called the *Grievous*, after a Kaleesh general from the Clone Wars they've turned into a legendary hero." He shook his head, as though the ways of aliens were impossible to fathom.

Jaina reached out. Her small bony hands grabbed her grandchildren's hand and Marin winced. "What is it, Grandma?"

Jaina stared at the holo, at the blurry battle-image and the droning broadcaster, and breathed in deeply. "It's coming."

"*What's coming?*" Vitor tried to squirm his hand out of hers.

The view on the broadcast swung suddenly, tracking upward until it stopped on a new set of ships that had just appeared above the planet. They fell toward Davek's fleet like a swarm of angry insects, ships Marin couldn't recognize but immediately knew. At the heart of the swarm was one bigger than any others, maybe even bigger than the *Makati*.

Suddenly the feed from the battle burst into nothing. The reporter remained, and when the INN logo replaced the static he said to the audience, very calmly, "You'll have to pardon the interruption. Our live link to the battle has been cut off. However, please stay tuned to the Imperial News Network. We'll bring you updates as they come in."

"Arlen and Marasiah are in that fight too, aren't they?" asked Tamar.

Jaina nodded. Helplessness washed over Marin, the familiar helplessness of a child who wished she could be an adult, be a Jedi so she could fight with her family to protect the people she loved.

Then she felt something else, another kind of helplessness. She felt it from Jaina and Tamar both, the helplessness of adult who knew they *could* have done something, but right now it wasn't possible.

Strange as it was, that made her feel a tiny bit better. They sat there on Bastion, light-years away from another fight that could sunder their family forever, but at least they could watch it together.

As he saw the mess of ships tumble frantically toward his position—Vagaari, Pal'shoran, Tylonian, Stromma, and more—Davek knew he should have seen this coming. When word had come down of a rising on Kalee he'd initially, foolishly, dismissed it as something the local interdiction force could take care of. By the time he'd learned things were worse, and sent Vice Admiral Renwar's task force to help, the situation was already spiraling out of control, with Kaleesh warriors on the surface killing any humans they could find while the local defense fleet had somehow regained control of their ships from the Imperial staff placed in temporary command. It was

exactly what the Empire didn't need right now: a war within as well as a war without.

But then the raiders had fallen out of hyperspace, right as the Jedi strike teams were moving to capture the *Grievous*. When Davek saw that great black Erath warship, he understood that he'd been wrong all this time. The hawks like Veers, Thane, and Grave had been right: the Kaleesh were no longer part of the Empire. Their whole planet was enemy territory.

He could see the initial explosive bursts through the *Makati*'s viewport, but he tore his attention away and focused on the tactical holo, which showed the larger picture. The situation on the ground was still a mess, but the fight in orbit had come close to being settled when the raiders arrived. All the Kaleesh picket ships had been crippled or destroyed except for their flagship, the *Grievous*. He'd just dispatched Arlen and a team of stormtroopers to board the ship and capture it. From what they could tell based on traced transmissions, it seemed like the leaders of the Kaleesh uprising were operating from the *Grievous*. If they could capture those leaders they might agree to call off the revolts on the planet. If they didn't they'd still be live captives instead of dead martyrs.

Now that ship was suddenly less important. Davek told the comm lieutenant, "Hail the strike team. Tell them to pull back."

"Right away, sir. We-" the lieutenant stopped and scowled. "Sir, they just threw up a jamming field."

"Like before?"

"It looks that way, sir."

Davek cursed aloud, but he'd been expecting it. They could still pass messages to ships via tight-beam text-only messages, but it was slower and more awkward than normal communications. In a frenzied fight like this it would cost lives. It was all they had.

"Get ready to beam out a new set of orders," Davek said and glanced at the tactical holo. Arlen's boarding craft seemed to have hooked onto the Kaleesh ship. The Erath vessel was hovering high above the rest of the battlefield, almost like it was waiting for all the other ships to soften Davek's fleet. Renwar's task force was taking a heavy pounding even as a full fighter wing from *Nightwatch* rushed

to assist. A pair of heavy Tylonian cruisers were bearing down on the *Makati* but it was nothing they couldn't handle for now. The real mess was in between the big ships: drones and fighters of every kind wove ribbons of smoke and flame and chewed each other to gnarled debris. His wife was out there somewhere, fighting with her squadron of Jedi pilots. Compared to her, Arlen was perfectly safe. If he could capture that Kaleesh ship he was exactly where he needed to be. Marasiah, though in much greater danger, was where she needed to be also.

He trotted toward the tactical station. "Lieutenant, can we identify the source of the jamming? Look for Pal'shoran ships matching the ones used before, probably at the back of their line."

"Two ships fit that profile. Marking them now, sir."

On the tactical holo, red circles appeared around two enemy ships. One was at the rear of the enemy wave, not far from the Erath ship. The other was closer by, near the cluster of Pal'shoran and Stromma ships that were attacking Renwar's *Tempest*.

"Lieutenant, can locate Knight One and tight-beam a message?"

The lieutenant's young face creased in a frown. "I think so, sir."

"Do it. Then prepare another one for *Nightwatch*. They've both got their work cut out for them."

When the order came down, it was exactly as Marasiah had expected. As long as that jamming field was up it was slowing their response and costing lives, especially those of Imperial fighter pilots who could no longer communicate with their headsets. Knight Squadron had the Force, and even as she twisted her TIE Saber around a Vagaari gunship she reached out to touch the minds of her pilots. Her knights were of varying skills and these Force-melds could only say so much, but her order was simple: *Follow me*.

With that she swung her nose forward and gunned it toward the Pal'shoran jamming ship at the rear of their main line.

Her pilots jumped, bobbed, weaved, and kept charging ahead. After they cut between a pair of barrel-shaped Stromma frigates she noticed a group of fighters, two dozen at least, emptying from their hangars to give chase.

Watch out, she told them, though she knew they'd be watching their aft scanners too. The Stromma ships were small and fast, and they maneuvered in tight formations so that one group was still behind Knight Squadron while the others moved in on its flanks. It was impressive coordination, the kind Marasiah wasn't sure even her pilots could do. To coordinate like that the pilots must have been connected via some comm system unaffected by the jamming, though she didn't see how that could be. From the Kaleesh they'd interrogated it sounded like the ships at Valc VII had received no orders whatsoever, even from their apparent flagship. That didn't make sense either; nothing here made sense.

When they attacked the Stromma fighters- little wedge-shaped ships like old A-wings or Howlrunners- splattered green laserfire all over Marasiah's shields. She sent a message to her pilots- *cut speed*- and killed her engines. The Stromma were slow to react and three flew right past her. Marasiah let the Force guide her to pick them off- one, two, three fireball-bursts. She felt a spike of anxiety in the Force-meld and checked her scanners. Two pilots, Knights Seven and Nine, had collided with hostile fighters during the slowdown maneuver. Neither ship had been destroyed but both were spinning in opposite directions as their pilots wrestled them into control.

Neither of them would join for the attack run. Marasiah told her other pilots *Press on* and kicked her ship toward the Pal'shoran vessel again.

She could sense their reluctance to leave their crippled friends, but like good Imperials they knew to follow orders. They followed, the rear ships in formation taking out a few more Stromma fighters on their way. The ships scattered around a slow-moving frigate of some type Marasiah didn't know, then reformed once they'd passed it. The Pal'shoran ship was getting close.

A wave rolled through the battle meld, first agony, then grief. Marasiah didn't have to look at her scanner to know that Knights Seven and Nine were dead, probably picked off by the remaining Stromma fighters.

She tried to tell her other pilots to forget it, to let the pain and anger roll through them and past them so they could keep on

fighting. Those were complex thoughts in words or the Force, but she felt most of them shunt aside their emotions and focus on the ship swelling closer in their viewports.

They'd destroyed one of these before. They could do it again, and if they had to they'd keep killing them until they brought this damn jamming field down. Marasiah armed her torpedoes and sent a command through the Force-meld, simple and impossible to mistake: *Attack!*

It was almost the same setup as Nesporis III, but in reverse: four Jedi and a squad of stormtroopers, now trying to get into a ship instead of defend it. Three of the Jedi were the same too: Arlen Fel, Deir Sinde, Rekkon Sholz with a new mechanical arm. A freshly-ordained knight, black-haired Yarin Sept, was the new one in the group and it was hard not to think of the kid as a replacement for the one lost on the previous mission. Arlen was getting sick of watching Jedi he'd helped train die in action; somehow he knew that Marasiah had just lost some of her pilots and he didn't plan on losing any of his own today.

Latching onto the *Grievous* and blowing through its auxiliary airlock was the easy part. The stuff that came after was hard. The Jedi led the stormtrooper squad down a set of narrow empty corridors, feet pounding on the grated metal floor. They moved cautiously closer to the angry seething presence Arlen could sense in the Force. He was so intent on the Kaleesh ahead of them that he dropped his guard; the grates in the ceiling suddenly pulled back and a half-dozen Kaleesh warriors dropped on top of them.

They were a fearsome fighters, each one over two meters tall with a skull-like white mask covering its face so only the predatory gold eyes shone through. The one that fell behind Arlen pinned a stormtrooper to the ground with three-clawed feet and slashed the long-bladed end of its pike through the soldier's neck. Before it could swing the blade up to the Jedi, Arlen lurched forward and thrust his lightsaber-tip into the Kaleesh's chest. The alien howled in pain, reared up, and pounded one leg into Arlen's sternum.

The impact sent him flying, skidding across the grate until he slammed into a wall. By the time he scrambled to his feet the hallway had become a chaotic slaughterhouse. Sinde sheared a Kaleesh's head from its shoulders with a broad swing of his lightsaber. A metal blade grated across Sholz's new metal arm, peeling off armor and synthetic skin; the Jedi responded by running his surprised attacker through with his saber. Sept and a pair of stormtroopers were on their knees, all three of them popping off shots with their blaster rifles as another stormtrooper was picked up and smashed repeatedly into the wall until his white-armored body went limp. The Kaleesh who'd battered him through him away like he was a doll and turned his blazing eyes to Arlen. The Jedi stood on shaking legs, gripped his saber with both hands, and beckoned his attacker forward.

The Kaleesh's staff was twice as long as Arlen's saber. He attacker ran forward, blade-first, forcing Arlen to sidestep away. At the same time, he lashed out with his weapon, cleaving the staff in half. The Kaleesh kept running and ducked beneath Arlen's horizontal swing. It stopped with astonishing speed, three-clawed feet gripping the grated floor for stead and lashed out with the bottom half of its staff before Arlen could bring his saber to block it. The metal slammed hard into his stomach and pinned him to the wall. He lifted his lightsaber weakly, instinctively, but the Kaleesh swept out with its free hand and knocked the saber bouncing across the grate. Then it grabbed Arlen by the neck and pulled him off his feet.

He grasped pathetically at the claws around his neck. They were so strong they could snap his neck at any moment. The Kaleesh held him close so their eyes could lock: gold around predatory slits. In a second of panic he touched the Force and felt the alien's mind. He realized, in a flash, it was different from the Tylonians he'd encountered before. This Kaleesh was angry, yes, and it didn't *want* to be fighting. It was frightened, too, and confused as to why the Jedi were attacking, Jedi who were supposed to be brave warriors, not pawns for a faceless Empire.

Arlen didn't understand. Neither did the Kaleesh; its slit-pupils widened in what must have been surprise, and the vice-grip on Arlen's throat loosened just a little.

Then there was a flash, and his lightsaber was suddenly buried hilt-first in the Kaleesh's head, green blade buzzing out the other side.

Arlen fell to the floor. The alien's body toppled too. Arlen landed on his butt and looked back to the frenzy. Deir Sinde caught his eyes, nodded, and went back to the fight. As he lurched forward and grabbed his lightsaber he heard the scrape of a blast door opening somewhere, and the war-cry of more Kaleesh charging into the fray.

It wasn't a battle they should be fighting, but they were in it and it was a battle to the death. Arlen gripped his saber with both hands and, grimly, stepped forward to do what shouldn't be done.

When the star destroyer sitting off the *Makati*'s port bow exploded, the light was so bright Davek and everyone else on the bridge had to cover their eyes. Just seconds before Tactical had reported that a Pal'shoran corvette was approaching the destroyer at high speed with no signs of slow-down. Even a normal collision wouldn't have destroyed both ships so thoroughly. It must have been loaded with baradium or a similar explosive before launching on its suicide mission. Davek had thought the ferocity of the enemy couldn't surprise him any more, but they'd done it again.

"Pull our fighter screen closer," he told Tactical. "Make sure they're ready if they try another run."

Without the ability to use normal communications it was hard for the fighters to coordinate. Two full wings of over seventy TIE-Xs each were swarming around the *Makati*, but they were less than half as effective as they'd normally be.

Davek glanced back at the holo for a bit of good news. The arrival of Captain Korak's *Nightwatch* had been the rescue Renwar needed; her star destroyer was still in fighting shape, and half of her support ships were still intact. They were all moving closer to the

Makati; Davek had ordered all Imperial forces to cluster together so that it would be easier to defend.

His eyes marked the Kaleesh flagship, all but forgotten in the larger fray. "Lieutenant," he asked, "Is the Jedi strike team still aboard the *Grievous*?"

He glanced at his board. "Yes, sir. Still there."

"Beam them a message. Ask them their status."

"Yes, sir."

Seizing the Kaleesh ship had become a lower priority; if Arlen was having trouble he'd call his brother back and order a squad of bombers to destroy it. Marasiah was still out there too; her Jedi squad had lost a third of its pilots but they'd taken out two Pal'shoran jamming ships. *Nightwatch* had destroyed a third but the field was still up; for all Davek knew the source might have been that big Erath vessel, still hovering over the battle zone like it was waiting to drop in and end everything in a flash.

Just as the thought sent a chill through his body, something else lit up on the holo. Three white markers, denoting unidentified ships, dropped into the battle zone above the Erath vessel. Davek's breath caught as the computer tried to mark them. Then they turned green and the lieutenant said, "That's a star destroyer, sir, and two attack frigates!"

"Identify," he snapped.

"ID reads *Onslaught*, sir."

His first thought was that it wasn't one of his. Then he remembered. "That's from the Second Fleet. Where's the rest of them?"

"I don't know, sir. With the jamming we can't tell."

"Right, I know." Grave must have been on his way; there was no telling how close he was. Their only hope was to wait as long as they could.

The Erath ship was already reacting to *Onslaught*. The destroyer was a *Predator*-class, less than a quarter the size of the enemy flagship, but as the battle between them joined a bigger ship dropped out of hyperspace next to *Onslaught*: an *Impellor*-class fleet

carrier that immediately began pumping out fighter and bomber wings.

A few tactical ensigns whooped barely-muted cheers as the enemy began to pull away from Davek's fleet to defend their flagship. How they communicated despite the jamming, Davek still didn't understand. He glanced at the holo and saw that the *Grievous* was moving in a different direction entirely, toward the edge of Kalee's gravity well. It was attempting to flee.

"Is there a response from the Jedi team?" he asked Tactical.

The lieutenant had been so distracted by the arrival of the Second that he had to check his console. "They're still bogged down, sir. Reports of very fierce fighting."

He restrained the urge to ask about Arlen. "Tell them to fall back. Get all wounded to the boarding ship and get out of there. Then tell them to use their guns and blast that ship's engines out if they can."

"Understood, sir. I-"

A gasp rippled across the bridge. Davek followed his crew's gaze out the viewport. The enemy fleet had been in the process of pulling itself apart; some ships staying low to attack Davek's ships while the others were pulling up to defend their flagship. Without warning a half-dozen new star destroyers had appeared, ripped from hyperspace by Kalee's gravity well. Their hard deceleration took them right into the middle of the enemy fleet and they had all guns blazing. Explosions lit up like a corona around the destroyers, and as Davek squinted through the glare he spotted another massive gray wedge that must have been the same size as the *Makati*. It could only have been Admiral Grave's flagship, the *Osvold Teshik*.

Everything was changing so fast the tactical crew couldn't keep up. As lights winked in and out on the holo the comm lieutenant called, "Admiral, sir! The jamming field's down!"

Davek sprinted over to the comm station. "Can we hail the *Teshik*?"

"We've got a link, sir."

"Do it now." Davek bent over the man's shoulders and watched the light on his console go green. A second later a shrunken blue

holo-image of Admiral Grave appeared. "Thank you for the save, Admiral. That insertion couldn't have gone better."

"You're quite welcome," Grave said, clipped and controlled. "Apologies for the delay. We had to stay outside the system and scope the battle zone."

"No problem. Do you think you can take that Erath ship?"

"I can try, though it looks like it's vectoring to escape again."

Davek glanced over his shoulder at the tactical holo. Sure enough, it was swinging its nose toward the edge of the gravity well. It would have to tear through *Onslaught* to get there but Davek had no doubt it could do so.

"Pull your ships back and let it go then," Davek said. "We'll concentrate on the ships we've got trapped here. Tear them to shreds."

"And excellent idea. I'll hail you again soon. *Teshik* out."

The holo shut down and Davek turned his full attention to the tactical display. The Erath ship was indeed moving to escape. All the other enemies trapped between the Second and Fourth Fleets were turning ferocious again. A Tylonian ship dove like a spear into one of Grave's star destroyers, destroying both. A Vagaari gunship rammed one of Renwar's support frigates and both vanished in a fireball. The fighters, at least, were finally able to organize in a proper defensive screen. Over a hundred of them dropped low over the *Makati* to protect the flagship as hundreds more enemy starfighters began throwing themselves into the destroyer's strong shields. Many of those ships were Tylonian drones but more were manned ships. By the end of this battle the enemy would have lost far more than the Imperials, just as at Nesporis III and Valc VII. Despite it all, they'd keep coming, again and again.

Then he remembered. He turned back to the comm station and said, "Patch me a line with Knight One. Prepare another link with the Jedi strike team. I need them both."

By the time the Jedi and surviving stormtroopers fell back to the assault shuttle and got a look outside, the entire battle had changed. The big Erath ship was gone, the raider vessels were throwing

themselves around in a suicidal frenzy, and the Second Fleet had arrived in force to deliver fiery death to an enemy that clearly wanted it badly.

All of them, it seemed, except the Kaleesh ship. As the Jedi shuttle detached from the *Grievous* it was already firing its engines and racing away from the rest of the fight. In minutes it would be able to escape from the planet's gravity well and slip into hyperspace.

Arlen was crammed in the shuttle's cockpit, along with Sinde, the stormtrooper captain, and both pilots when the comm light went on. That it even *could* go on was another surprise. The co-pilot slammed the speaker and Arlen got one more: His brother's voice, marred slightly by static, saying, "This is the *Makati*. Strike team, report."

"We've detached from the *Grievous*," Arlen said, leaning over the co-pilot's shoulder. "Six stormtroopers down, one Jedi and five stormies injured. We'll need medical help when we fall back."

"You'll get it. Can you get a lock on that ship?"

Arlen frowned. "With our weapons?"

"Yes! Can you knock it out before it escapes? If you can't disable it has to be destroyed."

Arlen didn't know what to say. The co-pilot said, "We've still got a full payload, sir. Eight missiles."

"Let them fly. Destroy that ship before it goes."

"Hold, pilot." Arlen squeezed the man's shoulder. "Davek, that ship's no threat. It's *running*."

"It's an enemy vessel with the leaders of the rising on Kalee aboard. Destroy it. *Now*."

"Davek—"

"Pilot, that's an order! Open fire!"

"Wait!" Arlen called, and used the Force to pull the co-pilot's hand away from the weapons station.

As he did it something flashed above them. Arlen looked up and saw a trio of TIE Sabers shoot past them. Each Jedi fighter let fly a pair of torpedoes. He watched as two sets exploded on the *Grievous*' aft shields; the last two slipped through and exploded on

the hull, right beyond the engine section. The frigate rocked but didn't slow down. As the TIE Sabers circled around for another pass it flashed, elongated, and disappeared into hyperspace.

The co-pilot, hand suddenly free, tapped the comm line back on and said, "Admiral, the *Grievous* just escaped."

"I saw that," Davek said stiffly. "Assault team, return to the *Makati*. Knight Squadron will fly escort. We'll have a medical team standing by."

The comm line died. Awkward silence settled over the cockpit and Arlen slumped against the back wall. As the shuttle swung around the rest of the fighting came into view. Davek's and Admiral Grave's fleets sat as two clusters over Kalee with the remaining enemy ships squeezed between them. Explosions flared all the time like slow-cooling embers. Davek might chew him out when he got back to the *Makati* but Arlen didn't regret what he'd chosen. The Kaleesh he'd felt on that ship had joined forces with the enemy, but for reasons of their own, not the suicidal fanaticism that had gripped the other raiders. He'd made the right choice, the Jedi choice. Even now, too many people were dying, and they had no idea why.

Another battle was over, and Marasiah didn't know what to think. She'd landed aboard the *Makati* an hour ago and it would take a while to tally all the casualties, but they'd probably come out even higher than Valc VII. The attacks were getting more and more fierce; after the Erath ship had fled the raiders had given up all pretense of normal combat and simply thrown themselves at the closest Imperial ship. Some hadn't even bothered with that; as she'd raced to intercept the *Grievous* she'd flown between two Tylonian frigates right before they'd smashed into each other. The waste of life was sickening.

When she returned to the ready-room the Jedi used aboard the *Makati* she found that Arlen's team had already returned; from the look on his face he was sick of it all too.

"How many did you lose?" she asked.

"Sholz lost his arm. Same one this time," Arlen said as he sat on edge of the table.

Sinde, standing beside him, asked, "How many did *you* lose?"

"Four." Marasiah sighed. "Cohl. Ressot. Nemyan. Lovarn."

Sinde winced; she recalled he'd trained with Lovarn for a while. She offered, "At least the Second showed up. It would have gone very differently if they hadn't."

"Yeah, Grave's the hero of the hour," Sinde sighed.

Marasiah couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic. "He did every he had to. He split the enemy fleet, then inserted himself into the gap with a precise micro-jump. It couldn't have gone better."

"All things considered," Sinde muttered.

There was a rap on the door. Marasiah was surprised to see Davek there; she thought he'd be busy with clean-up for a few hours yet.

"Admiral, sir," Sinde snapped. His arm froze, halfway pulled up, uncertain whether he was supposed to salute.

"At ease, Jedi, and dismissed, if you don't mind."

Sinde nodded and slipped out the door, leaving the three of them alone. Arlen sighed, crossed his arms over his chest, and met his brother's eye. Marasiah felt a spike of tension between them, one she didn't understand.

"I disobeyed your order," Arlen said simply. "I stopped my team from firing on the Kaleesh ship. I'm sorry it came to that, but I'm not sorry I did it."

Davek crossed his arms too and asked, very calmly, "Why is that?"

"Something didn't *feel* right, Davek. I felt their minds in the Force during the fight. They were battling us hard, but they weren't suicidal and mad like the rest of them. They're different somehow, maybe because they're not from the Unknown Regions. They're not totally in the grip of.... Of that Erath, or whoever's on that big black ship. There was no time to explain that over the comm, but that's how it is. And besides, we wouldn't have had the time or the guns to take 'em out anyway."

Davek looked hard at his brother for a moment, then shifted eyes to his wife. "Do you agree?"

"I don't know. I didn't touch their minds or know their intentions."

"About taking down their ship?"

"Maybe a few missiles could have helped. Though to be frank, I doubt it. That was heavily defended."

"But you fired on it."

"I had your direct order."

"You didn't feel what I did," Arlen interjected. "Listen, what happened, happened. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway. We should just drop it and try to move ahead."

"The Jedi are serving in *my* fleet under *my* orders," Davek said firmly. "I know Jedi don't like to see themselves as soldiers, but that's what you are now. You have to accept that and *act* like soldiers. If I can't rely on you, I can't use you."

They stared at each other hard. Marasiah knew they didn't always see eye to eye but this wordless tension was new. The death of their father had strained them both and she was afraid they might both snap at the worst time.

"He's right, Arlen," she said very softly. "We *are* soldiers, all of us."

Arlen kept his eyes on Davek's. He exhaled and said, "You can rely on me. I promise."

Davek kept staring, and Marasiah thought he might press and ask Arlen if he'd obey all orders from here on out. Instead he blinked, lowered his gaze a little, and said, "Good. I'll hold you to that."

"No problem."

"That's all for now."

"Okay. I'll go see to the other pilots."

Arlen lowered his head and slipped quickly and quietly out of the room. Marasiah stepped up to Davek and put a hand on his arm. "He was doing what he thought was right. Don't take it personally."

"I'm not-" He stopped, sighed. "I'm trying to take it *professionally*. I'm an admiral and I've got a soldier who wouldn't carry out his orders. What am I supposed to do?"

"Jedi are different from normal soldiers."

"I know. But I can't show favoritism either, not for Jedi, not for my family."

She squeezed his arms. "What are you going to do, put him up on charges? Davek, you have more important things to do than fight with your brother."

"I'm not-" He stopped again. "You're right. I just need to know I can trust him."

She reached up to touch his face. "Why would you ever doubt it?"

"I don't doubt his intentions. It's just... we've always been on different wavelengths."

"I've noticed," she said dryly. "But you're brothers, and you're on the same side, and the Empire needs you both."

He looked down at her and some of the hardness melted from his eyes. "It needs you too," he said.

"Flatterer," she smirked, and kissed him on the jaw. "Just let it drop for now. You've got more important fights ahead."

"I'm well aware."

"Is the offensive still on the table?"

"I think so. I hope so. I just got word that Admiral Darakon's outbound from Bastion. He'll meet me and Grave here. We'll figure out what to do next."

"So we hold over Kalee for now?"

"That's right."

It almost sounded like a respite; she knew it wouldn't last long. She wanted to tell him to take his time and make sure they all got things right, but now more than ever it seemed like time was running out fast.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Jedi academy was located on the outskirts of Ravelin, so when Vitor was roused from his bed in the morning by the sound of distant explosions and the faded drone of security airspeeders he knew that something in the city had gone very wrong.

He got dressed as quickly as he could and went down to the mess hall, where he knew there'd be holo-projectors patched into the news-nets. The big dining chamber felt empty with most of the adult knights gone; it was mostly apprentices Vitor's age or younger clustered around the holo. He found his younger brother there, sitting on a bench beside their grandmother and their cousin Mohrgan. He didn't see Marin or her mother yet so he perched himself atop a table next to another apprentice a little younger than him, Treis Sinde.

He didn't bother to ask Treis what was happening. The INN presenter- a woman, different from yesterday- was saying, "Security services have confirmed at least a dozen casualties so far, though they won't release identities at this time. We've also learned that an uncertain number of people have been airlifted to Ravelin Southeast medical center, some in critical condition."

Vitor hunched forward and intently watched the text scrolling beneath her talking head: Rioting in progress in Ravelin – Police and emergency response teams in action – Transit through city center shut down – Statement from HoS Avaris forthcoming.

He had a sick feeling he knew just what the rioting was about. The rising on Kalee yesterday- which had snowballed into a battle that had claimed tens of thousands of Imperial lives- must have brought the brewing anti-alien feeling on the capital to a peak. Sure enough, the INN broadcast flashed a map showing points in Ravelin where rioting was taking place. Most were in neighborhoods with primarily non-human populations.

As the newscaster went on Vitor heard the clap of boots behind him and saw Marin coming up. She pushed herself onto the tabletop next to him and said, "Looks bad, doesn't it?"

Vitor nodded. "Where's your mom?"

"She ran back to her ship to prep for emergency evacuation."

"Really?"

"No, but she said she needed to patch in a call." Marin frowned. "At least they're not coming after *us* yet."

"Do you think they will?" Treis asked from his other shoulder, clearly worried.

"It won't come to that." Vitor tried to sound more assured than he felt. "The Jedi are *helping* the Empire, not fighting it."

"Neither are most of the aliens," said Marin.

"The Kaleesh *rebelled*, though."

"That doesn't excuse this."

Vitor felt like he wanted to argue and didn't know why. Marin was right. He knew the Empire was far from perfect; that the changes their grandfather had wrought had created deep divides in Imperial society that there was no easy way of closing. He glanced at their grandmother; Jaina was still watching the broadcast in stony silence, one hand tightly gripping Roan's. The younger boy looked uncomfortable with the pressure but didn't try to squirm away. He knew what the old woman needed right now.

After reporting an update from Ravelin Southeast Medical- seventeen non-humans and nine humans currently in critical care-

the INN broadcaster announced that they'd be cutting to a live address from Head of State Avaris.

Just like that the reporter winked out and was replaced by a holo of an older woman with grey-streaked hair pulled from her pocked face. Though a civilian, she wore the martial olive-green of the moff she'd been before taking office. Even Vitor knew that was meant to assure a frightened populace with echoes of security only a military government could provide.

She was standing in front of a podium with the Empire's circular insignia behind her back, staring dead ahead for twenty-odd seconds as she waited for confirmation that all the major news-nets were patched in.

Then she said, "It is with grave regret that I address the citizens of the Empire this morning. Overnight, a series of deadly riots broke out in several districts of the capital. I have just ordered the City of Ravelin Police Department to take all steps to secure the city, with the intent on returning to normal business as soon as tomorrow. Those responsible for dealing injury or damage during these riots will be prosecuted. Compensation will be paid to the injured and their families. A Special Commission on Unrest will be appointed to deal distributive justice for these events.

"I assure you that I understand as well as anyone the stress that every Imperial citizen is going through right now. Many have lost loved ones. Many more fear for their own safety. We are facing an enemy about whom much is still unknown, and this is driving some to paranoia and violence. Paranoia is understandable but acts of violence against Imperial citizens can never be condoned, no matter who they are done by and no matter what the motivation. The Special Commission on Unrest will act according to this impartiality.

"In the meantime, our military will continue to wage the war against the invaders from the Unknown Regions. The Second and Fourth Fleet are taking the fight to the enemy as we speak, and Kalee is being pacified by elements from the Third Fleet. The First and Third both will remain in Imperial space, protecting all our worlds. The military has always been the backbone of the Empire.

Rest assured that it will continue to protect its citizens. Trust our fine men and women to do their duty and I promise you this threat will be ended soon.

"I encourage all citizens to remain calm. These are localized disturbances that in no way effect the Empire we all serve. We are unified. We will not be divided. We will face threats from the outside with a singular resolve. In this time of crisis we can do nothing else.

"Thank you for listening, and for your loyalty to the Empire- a loyalty that we all share."

And with that, the broadcast cut back to the face of the INN broadcaster. The woman, very smoothly, started recapping everything about the Ravelin riots. To Vitor she sounded like she was reciting last night's blitzball scores.

"That was a good speech, wasn't it?" Vitor asked a little tentative. He knew his father had problems with Avaris but to his ears it had sounded strong and assuring.

"She could have gotten more specific," his grandmother said, her first words that day. "She could have called out the people who *started* these riots."

Apprentices were not normally fast to speak up against the academy's most venerable Master and now was no exception. As the reporter brought the map of Ravelin back up Marin said, "She said most of the right things, though. We *are* all in this together. And we have to trust the people who are *supposed* to protect us."

Vitor thought she was right, but the comment invited another period of awkward silence. Eventually his little brother spoke up. "It would've been nice if she'd mentioned *us*, though."

Vitor hadn't notice the omission until now, but Roan was right. That inoffensive but vague speech had said nothing to support the Jedi Order, or for that matter non-humans specifically. The only thing she'd given support to was the military, of which the Jedi were only a temporary, kind-of component. It was also, he knew, the institution with the most history in the Empire and the most trust behind it.

Still, he wished she'd mentioned the Jedi by name. It would have made him feel a little more assured.

The orbital stations over Bilbringi had their day-cycles synced to those of Ravelin, which meant that when Lukas finally got off work-three hours past the normal- the news-nets were winding down reports of riots in the capital. As often happened lately, two desires warred between them: one wanted to get back to the simple comfort of his family, the other wanted to hit a drinking establishment with his ex-sergeant and get some liquid relief. Nowadays going home meant worried looks from Polaw and questions he couldn't answer from Leena, so after a short call to his disappointed wife he headed over to the Groundpounder. As the name implied it was a place frequented by stormtroopers and other infantry. It was frankly more of a dive than the Rimwalker but Malkin seemed to prefer that kind of atmosphere. It showed who the grizzled colonel was at heart.

The actual violence seemed to have come to a halt. Order had been restored by the Ravelin police without the intervention of the military, which Lukas supposed was a good thing, though the military would have locked things down faster. The reporters were saying that the death count had climbed up to forty-eight and might rise since a few beings were still in critical condition. How many of those were human and how many not was a question on everyone's minds, but none of the news-nets seems to have an answer yet.

The first drink took the edge off, but just as Lukas was starting to feel this might all be blowing over Malkin said, in a low and very gruff voice, "This is just the start, you know."

"You think there'll be more?"

"On Bastion or elsewhere," he nodded. "Depends how long this fighting goes on for."

"It sounds like the Second made a good show at Kaleesh."

"Yeah, I knew Grave would have his stuff together. And Prince Fel held out pretty okay." Malkin looked at his glass and ran a stubby forefinger around the edge. "But think of all the planets

we've got out there, especially by the border, with mostly alien populations. After them some of them have got to be thinking that they might be better off trying like the Kaleesh did."

"Would it? We stamped down hard on Kalee. And those raiders act like savages. They're not even interested in plunder anymore. It's just a big storm of destruction."

"I know. You're right. But still, some of them have got to be thinking it. I would be." He took a gulp, long enough to let Lukas ponder that, then said, "Me, though, I'm more worried about what might happen here."

"On Bilbringi?"

"Right. It's mostly military here, and we've all sworn the same oath, but still... A man has to wonder."

"We've both served with plenty of aliens. They're as loyal as you or me. They're not going to mutiny."

"Haven't you heard? Word's come down from Fleet Command that all enlisted Kaleesh are placed on 'temporary prohibitive leave.'"

"I hadn't heard that. I didn't even know there *were* Kaleesh in the military."

"From what I heard, less than a hundred overall. But imagine if something happens on, say, one of the Yagai colonies near the border. We've got thousands and thousands of them in the service. Probably thousands here on Bilbringi. Can you really tell me you'd trust every single one of those Yagai techs not to commit a single act of sabotage, even the passive kind?"

Lukas immediately thought to the engineering chief on *Voidwalker* whose life he'd saved. He wanted to say that all Yagai were as irrefutably loyal as Daharr, but logically, no, he couldn't make that claim. He decided not to say anything at all.

"I'm not saying it *will* happen," Malkin whispered. "I'm just saying we'd damn well better be prepared."

"Prepared how?"

The colonel lowered his voice further. "I've been talking with my old chiefs at the Yaga Minor base. They've agreed to send two more battalions over here."

"I hadn't heard that."

"Vice Admiral Jaeger just signed the order this afternoon. But the thing is, they're just transferring personnel. Security purposes, the order says. But most of the actual hardware for those battalions is staying at Yaga Minor."

"That's.... unusual, but not unheard of."

"Listen, Briggs, I've got a request. A small one. Something you can do as quartermaster."

He'd had a feeling things were going that way. "What kind of request?"

"It's simple. When those soldiers come over from Yaga Minor the transport's gonna be loaded down with supplies, for them and for other units. Now, I've got friends on Yaga Minor who can load extra equipment on those transports. They won't be on the manifests but they'll be there. When they get to Bilbringi all you just have to make sure they get shipped to those new regiments."

"Colonel, everything's checked in by *droids*. You can't just slip supplies in and out unnoticed."

"You're deputy chief quartermaster, aren't you? You must be able to pull *some* strings."

He sighed and looked at his glass. He'd seen this coming but still couldn't believe this conversation was happening. "It's... possible."

Malkin asked, "You remember Private Marsh, don't you?"

"Of course I remember." Marked by a tough attitude and sense of humor that was alternatively attractive and annoying, Leila Marsh had been one of his best squad-mates back on *Voidwalker*. He just didn't know why Malkin was bringing her up; they hadn't talked in at least ten years.

"Well it's Major Marsh Neals nowadays. Married but still in the service. Settled into a job very close to yours, in fact."

"On Yaga Minor?"

"On Yaga Minor."

He sighed. "And Yaga Minor won't need those supplies?"

"We've got enough as is. Vice Admiral Jaeger, bless his Voidwalker self, seems to think all we need is some extra boots on deck to keep this place safe."

"I trust Jaeger."

"So do I. Normally. But the Empire's in a crisis now, way worse than what happened at Senex-Juvex. We can't do everything on trust and we can't just follow the rules. You think those damn alien raiders follow any rules?"

"I doubt it."

"Then why the hell should we? It's just limiting ourselves. All I'm asking for you to do is look the other way, just this once. They're to keep everyone safe."

"Safe from who? These raiders or some hypothetical Yagai saboteur?"

"Either. Both. Neither. This isn't the time to be careful about stuff, Briggs. You're the family man. You know what you've got to protect."

He glared at Malkin. "Low blow, Sarge."

The older man didn't flinch. "Just think about it. Let me know tomorrow so I can tell Major Marsh what to do."

There was nowhere the conversation could go after that, so Lukas finished his drink and went back to the habitat section. The kids were asleep but Marian was not. She seemed actually relieved to have him back sober and relatively early, which just made him feel guilty. When they woke up the next morning they roused the kids too, and Lukas was treated to that grim morning ritual of watching the latest bad news with his children.

As he watched their faces- Polaw's wide-eyed but confused, Leena's creased with concern- he realized that Malkin was right. It had been a low blow but it had landed nonetheless. He'd decided a while back that protecting his family was more important than following the rules. Now, finally, it was time to act on his choice.

It was impossible not to feel out-of-place on the bridge of a Mandalorian ship. That Damien Corde was the only one aboard without the distinctive *beskar'gam* full-body suit and T-visor helmet

was bad enough, though he'd at least brought along a decent set of plasteel armor plates and open-faced helmet for this mission. What made things profoundly eerie was that the two dozen Mandos working the bridge of this *Teroch*-class assault frigate all communicated via their helmets. From Corde's perspective they all worked in eerie silence, as efficient as Geonosian worker drones. Like a bunch of insectoids, the faceless warriors also seemed to ignore anyone who wasn't part of their hive mind, which in this case meant only Corde.

He could only take so much of it, frankly. When, by his count, they were getting close to their destination he stepped up behind Gevern Auch's silver armored back, cleared his throat volubly, and asked, "Will we be meeting up with your other ships before we begin the attack?"

Auchs turned around to face Damien; they were both tall men and met eye-to-visor. As of yet Auch's hadn't taken off his helmet in Damien's presence, though he'd seen file holos of the Mandalore's face: blunt, clean-shaved and narrow-eyed, short-cropped hair going gray. He was in his fifties now, having ruled the Mandalorian Protectors for some twenty years, but seemed to be as in-shape and lethal as ever.

"They'll be meeting us there," Auch's said in a deep rasp that may or may not have been aided by the speakers of his helmet.

"So we'll all we decant from hyperspace outside the combat zone?"

Auchs shook his head. "They'll meet us *there*. We already have a scout drone in place so we know the Vagaari ships are at the waystation. If we bring our big ships out of the hyperspace close to the system we might tip off our targets."

"I've shared the reports on their ships. They don't have the technology to spot us if we drop out far enough away."

"Vagaari might not, but the Stromma might."

"There's Stromma there?"

Without another word, Auch's walked over to the tactical station. The officer seated there brought up a holo-feed from the

scout drone. Sitting over the planetoid were three Vagaari gunships, one larger frigate, and a pair of Stromma vessels.

"Is this a problem?" asked Auchs.

Damien knew it was a problem and an opportunity at once. The Imperials simply didn't have good technical specs on Stromma ships. Boarding parties would have no idea what lay inside. At the same time, using ships from multiple races would make their false-flag attack seem more authentic.

"What do you plan to do with the Stromma ships when we arrive?" he asked Auchs.

"You hired us to capture Vagaari vessels."

"I'll up your pay if your take at least one of those Stromma ships too."

"Do you have their specifications?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Fifty percent more."

"Twenty if you take one ship, thirty for both."

"Done," Auchs said. The holo winked out and the Mandalore still didn't speak. Damien figured that he was calling someone through his helmet's comm system but there was no way to be sure. After spending the past three days on this ship he'd decided that these Mandalorians went out of their way to alienate foreigners. It went along with everything he'd heard about them: clannish, arrogant, often secretive, usually savage, but always good fighters.

He set himself to waiting. Now that he knew what they were up against the situation felt slightly less interminable. The plan was to capture every enemy ship they ambushed at the way-station. If a ship couldn't be captured it would be destroyed. They'd leave no trace of their presence. The Mandalorians' rate of pay was based on how many ships they seized, and Damien trusted that, combined with professional pride, would net them most of the vessels at their destination.

He knew the time had come when activity on the bridge picked up. A few more armored warriors arrived and took what looked like gunnery stations. Auchs strode up to the center of the command

deck and leaned forward, grasping the waist-high rail that separated the metal platform from the wide forward viewport.

Damien stepped up on his flank and asked, "Showtime?"

"Showtime," rasped Auchs.

Three seconds later, hyperspace dissolved and the viewport was filled with stars. It panned down quickly as their frigate adjusted pitch. The planetoid, drifting in slow orbit at the far edge on its uninhabited system, was a clearly-visible lump of space rock. As it swelled in size Damien saw three more blunt-faced Mandalorian ships wink into existence: another *Teroch*-class frigate and two smaller *Crusader III*-class corvettes. He spotted the enemy ships too, all hovering low over the refueling station that protruded from the planetoid. The Vagaari gunships were about half the size of the Crusaders; the frigate and two Stromma ships were sized more like the Mandalore's vessel.

The Crusaders rushed in fast, spewing agile T-shaped Beskad starfighters and bulkier bombers. Damien had to admit the timing of it all was impeccable: the Mandalorian ships converged from different directions in a shared window of about four seconds and were able to take the enemy completely by surprise. He watched as the Crusaders unleashed chains of plasma fire from their forward cannons and destroyed the refueling station- and its comm transceiver- before it had a chance to call for help.

Damien had been on ships' bridges during combat situations before. He was used to the constant back-and-forth of order and response between a capital ship's crew, words always formal and tones always tense. There was none of that now, at least not for him to hear. He watched the battle unfold before him in eerie silence. Auchs took his frigate in close, right for the nearest Stromma ship. The barrel-shaped vessel brought its broadside guns to bear but the *Teroch*-class frigate, as befitting a Mandalorian ship, had most of its guns pointed forward for the fiercest attack. The first barrage of missiles exploded on the Stromma ship's shields. The Mando frigate pulled up more nimbly than a comparable Imperial ship could have, and Damien had to grasp the railing to keep from being thrown

back. As their view panned upward he caught the flash of a few missiles slipping past the shields and exploding on the hull.

He had the urge to remind Auchs that the goal was capture, not destruction, but he knew insulting the Mandalore's acumen would get him nowhere. Keeping one eye on the viewport, he watched Auchs make a short vertical chopping motion with his hand. Damien looked over his shoulder to the tactical station. By the time he made sense of the holo a trio of smaller ships had left their frigate. He looked back out the viewport and spotted two of them racing ahead: oblong and flat, with two rotating thrusters jutting out from either long side. The boarding teams were away.

As he watched them dive out of view he realized something he should have before. The Chiss intelligence he'd shared with Auchs had included specifications for a nerve gas that would act fast and incapacitate a shipful of Vagaari without killing them. He had no such concoction for Stromma biology, which meant taking their ships would be extra-difficult. Mentally, he admitted that maybe the Mandos deserved a thirty-five percent raise.

The other Mandalorian ships had launched their own boarding parties, and five minutes into the battle Damien could see that every enemy vessel had a Mando troop ship attached like a limpet. As their frigate swept past the Vagaari frigate he could see that they'd inserted themselves right where they were supposed to, behind the well-hidden command deck. The plan was to ignore airlocks and obvious docking ports to simply cut their way through the hull. Mando ships were made for such maneuvers and the damage could be repaired quickly before putting them in operation again; when they staged their attack on the Chiss all these ships would either escape or be destroyed so badly a little older damage wouldn't stand out.

As expected, the Vagaari gunships were the first to go dead in space. The bigger ships would take longer to commandeer, and the remaining Mandos began to fly loose circles around the planetoid to keep the Stromma and Vagaari pinned close to its surface. One of the big Stromma ships stopped firing next. The remaining Vagaari

frigate stayed where it was but the last Stromma fired its engines and pressed forward in a desperate move to escape.

"Stop it at all costs," Damien snapped on instinct, and knew it was unnecessary as soon as the words left his mouth.

The Mandalorians knew what they were doing. As their frigate swung to give chase, Damien spotted two boarding ships kicked off from the vessel's hull and fall away. The second Mando frigate leaped ahead to cut off the Stromma's escape vector while the Crusaders began fast attack runs with the help of their fighters and bomber wings. The Stromma tried to evade and find a new hyperspace exit vector but their ship was too big, the Mandos too fast. With a little more time they might have punched their way through but their pursuers didn't grant it. The Mandalore's own frigate delivered the killing blow with a double-volley of concussion missiles that, combined with heavy fire from the bombers, succeeded in bursting through the shields and lighting up the engine section with one big explosion. The Mando ships began to circle the crippled ship like scavenger birds. When the flare and debris cleared it was obvious that the Stromma ship would require significant resources to get into fighting shape, including replacement for all its blown-out engines and likely the power core as well.

"Well?" Auchs said aloud. "Instructions?"

Damien knew what he was asking. "You've permission to destroy it."

Auchs nodded. Two seconds later, every Mandalorian vessel opened fire. Lasers and missiles punched through its unshielded hull, one after another, and within a minute the bulky frigate had become a gnawed-up and fire-blackened mess drifting through space.

If the Mandos felt elated by their victory, they gave no sign that Damien could see. Even their postures remained stiff with intent as they swung the frigate back around to face the five enemy ships all drifting near the planetoid.

As the other Mando frigate pulled into view Damien saw three more troops ships disembark. Those disabled vessels still needed

pacification, or at least more boarders to help deal with the knocked-out crew. He was about to ask Auchs for a sitrep when the Mandalore said, "They're having problems with the Stromma. They're putting up a fight."

"What about the Vagaari?"

"The knockout gas worked as planned."

"Did you try it on the Stromma too?"

"We tried the variant usually used on humans," Auchs said. "No effect."

"So it will have to be a fight then."

"Yes." With that Auchs turned for the exit.

Damien trotted after him. "Are you going to join the boarding party? Personally?"

"A *Mand'adlor* leads from the front, Master Blackmor."

The door slid open. Auchs stepped through. What came over Damien wasn't just a stupid compulsion to prove himself to these people; Moff Veers had charged him to watch over this process every step of the way and make it was done right.

"I'll come with you," he said.

Auchs stopped and turned on his heel. Damien could see his own reflection in black mirror-black visor. "It's safer if you stay here."

"I can handle myself in a fight. Just give me a breath filter and I'll be good to go."

Auchs watched him, motionless like a metal statue, until he said, "All right. Follow me."

Damien did just that. By the time they reached the hangar two more landing craft had almost fully boarded. Auchs must have called ahead because there was a Mando waiting for them with a breathing mask as well as a quality Verpine rifle, both for his use.

"Thank you, soldier," Damien said as he took the equipment. He didn't get a 'you're welcome' but he hadn't expected one.

As the drop ship neared its target Auchs did him the favor of explaining their difficulty. Since they had no good schematic for the interior of the Stromma ships they'd been forced to storm the well-defended defended landing bay and break through existing airlocks

rather than risk blowing through a critical node in the hull. When their craft set down in the hangar it was clear the place was secured, and that it had been costly. As he stepped out onto the deck, breathing mask securely strapped to his face and black armored helmet on his head, Damien scanned the former battle zone. Mandalorian *beskar* could deflect just about any small-arms blaster bolt but from the black dents in their armor and the scorched pits on the deck, the Stromma had defended themselves using grenades or small rockets. He got confirmation when he saw a shoulder-mounted launcher near the scattered piles of green-faced aliens. The Mandalorians had gotten the better of the exchange, but the Mandos had still lost over a dozen of their own. The mercenaries took loss in stride, like soldiers who served a real cause. In some way Damien would never understand, their warrior culture instilled in them the same kind of loyalty agents like him felt for the Empire.

Damien stayed behind Auchs as the group charged into the halls of the ship. Old combat training came back on instinct; he crouched low with the rifle cradled in both arms, eyes always up and ahead. They passed through several winding corridors, past a half-dozen crumpled Stromma bodies, before Auchs threw up a hand, signaling the party to stop. A second later a few more Mandos came around the corner to meet them. Though they talked through their helmets and with short chopping hand signals Damien could recognize one of them from his broad torso and unique armor: dark violet with gold highlights.

When the party started moving again Galaset dropped back behind Auchs and grunted, "Glad you could join us."

"I want to make sure you people earn your pay."

The Kerestian made a choking sound inside his helmet. Damien chose to take it as vocal admiration instead of a snort of amusement.

The ship's lift system was apparently down, which meant they had to clamber up a series of vertical ladder shafts to get close to the bridge, which the ship's crew had apparently fortified while another set of barricaded Stromma tried to restart the engines after the damage a team of Mando saboteurs had done to them. The wide,

low-ceilinged hallway leading to the command deck had become a battle zone thick with smoke and the strobe and tang of laserfire. The lead Mando boarding party had apparently brought up broad *beskar* shield-plates which they'd jammed into the deck and used as cover while they tried to break down the barriers the Stromma had themselves erected.

Auchs charged right into the fray. Damien hung back and watched as one Stromma round panged off his chest-plate, slowing but not stopping him as he raced to the foremost shield.

"Leads from the front, doesn't he?" Damien grunted as he ducked behind one *beskar* barrier with Galaset.

"That he does," the alien grunted. Placing the barrel of his rifle in a notch atop the barrier, he began to pump laserfire toward the Stromma emplacements.

Just as Damien peeked over the edge to scope their defenses, the hallway thundered with the sound of a heavy repeating cannon. Damien ducked back down but saw one Mando caught in mid-charge by a heavy bolt that lifted him off his feet and sent him flying twenty meters down the hall. He impacted on the deck with a sick crunch and didn't move.

"Feisty bastards, aren't they?" Galaset said as he popped off a few more shots.

Damien peeked above the barrier's edge and did the same, not really caring if he didn't hit anything. He'd come here to see how it was done and make sure the Mandos didn't do anything stupid. If he got himself killed here, failing Veers, failing *Valera*- he'd be the stupid one.

"Get ready," Galaset told him.

"Ready for what?"

Instead of replying the armored Kerestian rose to his feet and shouted with helmet speakers on full, "*Oya Mando! Oya! Oya!*"

And suddenly all the other Mandos, silent inside their helmets until now, screamed the same battle cry so loud Damien was stunned in place. They ran and charged, shooting and shouting at the top of their lungs, and he realized that if he was frozen by all this, so were the Stromma.

"Kriffing Mandos," he swore, picked up his gun, and charged after them.

The charge was already on. The big gun emplacement blasted one Mando off his feet, then caught another in the face, snapping his scorched helmet back at an angle no neck could bend. The rest kept coming and Damien was with them, shooting madly ahead. He saw a small dark fleck arc through the air and his mind registered *grenade* right before the explosion shook the hall. He stumbled, fell on one palm and pushed himself right back up. By the time he was running again the Mandos had overrun the melted wreckage of the gun emplacement. He spotted what he thought was Gevern Auch's brown armor up front right before another, brighter explosion rocked the hall.

By the time Damien got up to the wreckage of the bridge's protective blast doors two dozen Mandos had stormed the command deck. They showed no mercy, gunning down every Stromma in sight, most of them still in their chairs. As he stepped though the smoke Damien searched out Auch and found him at the front of the deck. Then he spotted Galaset, closer, pumping extra rounds into prone Stromma bodies, just to make sure.

Damien had no qualms about being ruthless with a dangerous enemy, but it had been a long time since he'd been in a battle this nasty. Maybe that was it, or maybe some atmospheric toxins had slipped through his breath mask, but he found himself going faint.

The world darkened for a moment; then something moving. At the right side of his vision a green body moved on the floor. He spun. The Stromma grabbed his fallen blaster and popped off one shot that took Damien in the shoulder, half-spinning him around. As inertia tugged him, he swung his rifle up and opened fire. Three different Mandos nearby fired at the same time, and with a flash his attacker became nothing but a black and blast-riddled body on the floor.

"I think I got the kill shot, actually," Damien breathed.

"I think you did," said Galaset. "Damage?"

"Plasteel's no *beskar*, but it gets the job done." He flexed his shoulder; sore from the absorbed impact but nothing more.

"Good to know," Gevern Auchs said as he stalked up to the two of them. "Engine section's clear also. Mission accomplished."

"And the Vagaari ships?"

"Secure. We've gathered the crew. They're incapacitated but alive."

He and Auchs had already discussed this. When the Chiss combed through the wreckage of the ships that had attacked them they'd find lots of Vagaari dead from explosions and vacuum exposure. Which meant as many captives as possible had to stay alive for now.

"Keep them breathing," Damien said. "Same with the Stromma. I'll give your people one standard day to refit these ships, then we're off to the next stage. Is that good?"

"Works for me," said Auchs. "And since we're using an extra ship to attack, we deserve a wage increase for Stage Two."

Damien had expected that, but it still felt strange to talk payment on a smoking battle-zone, surrounded by scorched corpses. *Kriffing Mandos*, he thought, and offered, "Twenty-percent more."

"Thirty."

"Twenty-five."

"*Thirty*."

"Twenty-five. I can bring in other people to crew these ships if I have to."

It was a bluff, but Auchs didn't seem willing to call him on it. "Twenty-seven."

"Done." Damien extended a hand. Auchs' men watched as he shook.

Once that was done, Damien stepped aside and watched the clean-up begin. Auchs had squeezed a little more out than he'd wanted, and definitely more than Veers would like, but in the end it was about results. As with everything else in life, you got what you paid for, and these were consummate professionals.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

According to the Kaleesh flight records, the planet was called Olmarak, though who gave it that name and for what reason was just the first of many mysteries Jodram expected he'd have to live with. The ship he and three other Jedi shared was called the *Ossus Explorer*, an unremarkable-looking Koensayr light freighter that would, they hoped, allow them to slip close to hostile planets without attracting attention. It had been almost five full days from Ossus to this planet past the edge of the Unknown Regions and when the time finally came to decant from hyperspace everyone was on edge and eager to get things moving.

Jodram was a good pilot, but he stuck himself in the co-pilot's seat and ceded the *Explorer's* flight controls to Ayen Qemar. The Nautolan Jedi wore her long fleshy head-tentacles bound at her back and as the clock ran down to the target time her pupil-less black eyes narrowed to watch it. Jodram had already run through full checks: *Explorer* was ready to throw up shields on a moment's notice, fire its twin heavy blaster cannons, and if absolutely necessary deploy the concussion missiles it kept in a secret sensor-shielded compartment below the chin of the jutting cockpit.

Eyes still on the counter, Qemar reached forward and grabbed the throttle that controlled hyperdrive. She counted aloud, "Three, two, one," then pushed it forward.

The blue-white blur flashed and dwindled to nothing: blackness and scattered stars. For a second Jodram thought they'd come out too far at the edge of the Olmarak system; then Qemar nudged the flight controls a little and the view from the cockpit panned down.

From the very first he knew that something was wrong. The planet was a great red-brown sphere, the kind you'd expect from a world with high iron content and no atmosphere to nurture vegetation. The galaxy was full of dead docks but this one was different; as *Explorer* drew closer he could make out with his naked eye over a dozen massive impact craters dotting its surface, as though a whole herd of comets had smashed into the planet at once.

As they got even nearer Jodram began to make out the small distant engine-flares of starships moving in and out of the planet's orbit. Many, he saw, were dropping down to the surface.

"How many ships are out there?" asked the team leader, Master Sothais Saar.

Jodram checked the scanners. "Picking up seventeen unique drive signatures, and that's what we can see from this angle. Looks like most of them are big ships too, based on the energy output from their engines. They look like the ones escaping orbit are moving pretty slowly too. Implies lots of inertia."

"Can we identify types?" asked the fourth member, the Bothan Jedi Kath Mey'lya.

"Not yet. We need to get a little closer."

"At least they don't sound like combat ships," Mey'lya muttered.

Qemar gave only a mild grunt in reply as she edged *Explorer* on further. The rust-colored planet filled their viewport and Jodram could see in full detail the staggering size of the impact craters. Even one of those would have been enough to end all life on this planet, if there's been any to begin with.

As they dived toward the surface Jodram watched the tactical scanner. The nearest ship was still far away and didn't seem to be paying attention to them as it climbed slowly out of the gravity well.

It looked to be a massive cargo hauler, barrel-shaped and probably of Stromma design.

"At last nobody's getting in our way," he muttered.

"What kind of readings do we have on the atmosphere?" asked Saar.

Jodram checked the sensors. "Looks like.... Huh..."

"Huh?" asked Mey'lya.

"Some oxygen. Some carbon dioxide. It's all very thin. Outside surface temp looks very cold on the nightside, above freezing on the dayside. Makes sense, with the weak atmosphere."

"Ayen, get us close to one of those craters," Saar said. "Jodram, scan for heat signatures."

He frowned. "Are you expecting some kind of volcanic activity? Those are clearly impact markings."

"I know. If there's residual heat we might figure out how old they are."

If there was any heat left over from the explosive impact then the comets- or whatever it was- must have hit recently. Given how many had hit the planet at once, Jodram didn't like the sound of that. As the planet's desolate surface crawled by beneath them, he turned *Explorer's* sensors downward to pick up the chemical content of the dust and ridges. As expected, high ferrous content. Something flashed and disappeared, he said, "Wait, slow down and circle back."

"Did you find something?" asked Qemar as she shut engines.

"Maybe. Just edge back a little. And drop lower."

As they dropped nearer the surface and pivoted back the light from Olmarak's primary glared in their faces, undamped by thick atmosphere or cloud cover. Qemar adjusted their angle a little more and dipped their nose so they had a good view of the planet's surface a mile below.

What they saw was unmistakable, but no one said anything at first. They all just stared at the clearly artificial rings, straited by dozens of straight lines spanning out from the center, all of them glinting with the reflective sheen of smooth metal surfaces jutting out of layered red dust.

"I'm taking us lower," Qemar said, and no one objected.

When *Explorer* lowered to an altitude of less than one thousand feet it became clear that they were looking at the ruins of a city. The buildings themselves seemed to have been rent open by a concussive force rather than burned or bombed out. The street-lanes themselves were all covered by dust but the tall metal buildings seemed to denote a reasonably sophisticated civilization, maybe even a spacefaring one, snuffed out in its prime.

"And idea how long ago this city was destroyed?" asked Mey'lya.

"Can't tell with these sensors. We'd have to go down there and do something more thorough." Jodram looked a question as Master Saar.

The white-haired old Chev shook his head. "No. Qemar, keep us going toward the nearest impact crater."

"Yes, sir," the Nautolan said with a new gravity in her voice.

As *Explorer* rose higher and accelerated Jodram swiveled his chair back to face Saar. "Is there a *reason* to think this destruction is recent?"

"There's no reason not to. It makes sense if it was. What do you think all those ships are doing, coming in and out of the atmosphere?"

"Stripping it of resources, I'd bet," said Mey'lya. "If those asteroids- or whatever hit this planet- broke through the crust they might have opened access to all kinds of useful minerals."

Jodram nodded. "Which the raiders have clearly been harvesting to fuel their war machine. Or whatever kind of machine they've got. I wonder if there's a method they're using or if it's just a free-for-all."

"That's one of the big questions we're here to solve," said Saar. "Ayen, how much further to the nearest crater?"

"Almost there. Jodram, does it looks like we'll have company?"

Jodram checked his scanners. He didn't pick up any ships in motion yet but there were thrust traces in the atmosphere. "Looks pretty likely," he said. "How do we want to go about this, Master Saar?"

"Ayen, set us down on the rim of the crater if you can. You can cool down engines too. Just put us someplace where we can get lots of good readings and watch what's going on."

When they reached their destination Qemar did just that. She extended the landing gear and set them down on the crater's rim, then cooled sublight engines to standby mode. After that, they settled in to observe.

The crater itself was vast, some seventy kilometers in diameter and fifteen kilometers deep. The impact had indeed broken the planetary crust, and the crater's broad dish had clearly been artificially pierced dozens of times. As they watched one heavy hauler- Jodram's sensors marked it as a Pal'shoran ship- was sitting on the opposite side as them, halfway between rim and nadir. As Jodram scanned closer he saw the massive craft wasn't just a cargo ship; it was some kind of mobile miner with a refinery section and a deep drill used to bore deeper into the planet.

Looking closer at the other excavation sites revealed different methods had been used, presumably by different minters. One whole chunk of the crater looked to have been stripped away; by his estimated more than one thousand tonnes of minerals.

"It's clear what's happening here," Saar told them. "The asteroids' impact destroyed all life on this planet and cracked it open. The raiders have been stripping its carcass clear of meat."

"Like scavengers," Jodram muttered.

"Maybe." Saar's expression darkened. "Unless they killed it themselves."

"Wait, what?" Mey'lya's fur bristled. "Do we have any evidence of that?"

Saar looked to Jodram. "What do your sensors show? Any residual heat from an impact in this crater?"

"It's possible." He shrugged noncommittally. "The temperature is notably higher inside the crater but that could be from lots of things. Residual impact heat, yes. Also heat coming from inside the planet. We don't know how stable or unstable it is beneath the crust."

"How would someone even *do* that?" asked Mey'lya.

"I remember what my grandparents told me about the Vong war," Jodram said. "They used some kind of gravitic bio-weapon to drag planets' moons down, crack open the surface, then tear the planets to pieces for resources."

"This wasn't one moon, though. Someone must have hijacked a bunch of asteroids and thrown them into the planet."

"There are ships designed to tug and shove asteroids," said Qemar. "They're mostly for clearing space-lines, though. I guess someone *could* modify them to drop into a planet, but they'd still have to haul the asteroids through hyperspace from somewhere else. I didn't pick up any space rock in this system when we entered."

"Unless they threw them *all* into Olmarak," Mey'lya muttered, clearly confused what to believe and unhappy with every prospect. Jodram understood that completely.

A pinging from his console grabbed everyone's attention. Jodram looked at the tactical scanners and swore. "Multiple targets inbound fast. Looks like a bunch of little ships in the lead and one big one behind them."

"Tylonian drones?" asked Saar.

"Looks like."

Qemar immediately began warming engines. It would take at least two minutes for the sublights to get back at full operating capacity; by that time the Tylonians would almost be on them.

"Master, we're not going to be able to run," he told Saar. "We'll have to fight."

"We didn't come here to brawl all the raiders at once."

Qemar started, "But Master—"

The Chev held up a hand. "Jodram, once we get off the ground bring up shields to full and charge weapons, but do *not* fire. Ayen, lift us off from the surface but do *not* run. When they get within range send them a hail."

It was the smart option. It was, frankly, the *only* option to get out of this alive. Jodram still didn't like it and his heart pounded in his chest as their kicked up from the surface with a cloud of rest dust. He could feel Qemar bleeding anxiety in the Force too, anxiety

she kept off her blue-green face as she leveled *Explorer* at an altitude of two thousand feet and swung their nose around to face the Tylonians. The small drones were on them in a flash. Instead of splattering laser-blasts on their shields the drones began to fly tight circles around *Explorer* while the mothership, a black-hulled oval-shaped craft about the size of a Corellian corvette, caught up with them. When it got close enough the mothership killed its engines and shunted power to repulsors so both spaceships hung over Olmarak's red surface, staring each other down.

Qemar tapped the comm console and announced with a shaking voice, "Hail is sent."

Saar nodded. Jodram gripped the armrest of his seat and tried to breathe slowly. They waited for five drawn-out, agonizing seconds before the speakers clicked on and they were greeted with what sounded like three nek battle dogs barking at the same time.

Explorer's computer had been loaded with translation software for a dozen languages common in this part of space, but Tylonian wasn't one of them. Instead Saar leaned over Qemar's shoulder, close to the comm console, and replied in a language long on consonants interspersed with sharp precise vowels. Sy Bisti, Jodram knew. The old Chev had been a Jedi for half a century and spent most of that time on the Outer Rim, including the edges of the Unknown Regions where the trader's tongue was commonly used.

Tylonians, best Jodram knew, weren't physically capable of speaking Sy Bisti but they might be able to understand it. After another five painful seconds of waiting a tinny mechanical voice replied to Saar in the same tongue. Saar replied at once; the language seemed to come naturally to him. Jodram and the other two Jedi watched, understanding nothing but feeling the calming sensation he was emanating in the Force. Whether he meant to calm them or was projecting his own relief Jodram wasn't sure, but his heart was no longer about to punch through his chest, which was something.

The conversation went on for several minutes; Saar betrayed no alarm the whole time, in his voice or the Force. Their talk ended as abruptly as it began. The Tylonian mothership recalled its drones,

turned around, and soared away. As it left something lit up and Qemar's comm console and she bended in to look.

"That was amazing, Master," Mey'lya breathed as her fur finally settled flat against her face.

"Jedi have a long history as diplomats," the old Chev said. "Ayen, do you have it?"

"Have what?" asked Jodram.

"Nav coordinates," Qemar said. "Coordinates to *where*?"

"The Tylonians were actually quite helpful," Saar said. "I told them we wished to serve the King of Storms but had not been told where to find him, only that a Pal'shoran had directed us here. The Tylonians said it wasn't far, and that everyone here was gathering more resources for the King's next great push."

"They volunteered his location? Just like that?"

"Apparently they're more sociable when they're not stuck in an Imperial interrogation cell."

"Or they've been so brainwashed they think everybody's in love with their Storm King," Jodram muttered.

"There's only one way to find out," said Saar. "Ayen, take us up. Start warming the hyperdrives."

"Wait, that's *it*?" asked Jodram. "We're just... going where they say? Should we bring Masters Qel and Saav'etu?"

"Not yet. Ping their ships, leave a message as to where we're going, but warn them *not* to follow right away. If this is some kind of trap we don't want to drag them along."

Jodram nodded; it was a good idea and would have been comforting except for the part about jumping into a potential trap.

"So what's the plan, Master?" Qemar asked as they pointed their nose toward faded stars and accelerated. "Go to this planet, scout it out, and see if we can find this Storm King's location?"

"Given his apparent preference for a giant Erath warship he shouldn't be that hard to *find*. Getting to him, and learning what he's really about, is going to be the tricky part."

"Well," Mey'lya muttered, "It's good we've got a diplomat aboard."

Saar nodded at the complement, but for one second his confident Force aura weakened and Jodram sensed the anxiety beneath. At least, he thought, the Master and his knights were all on the same page.

It was a homecoming Darth Terrid had never expected to make. Even now it felt unreal. He'd never been to the Cam'co Colonial Station before but everything about it brought back memories of his long-ago childhood in the Chiss Ascendancy: the wide low hallways, the unique hiss the pneumatic doors made on opening, the way the blue-skinned red-eyes beings always walked quick and straight and staring ahead, even when walking in groups. None of them paid him any attention at all. To them, to their quick and casual sidelong glances, he was just one of the thousands of spacers who pushed traffic large and small through Cam'co.

The station was located on a system at the edge of Ascendancy space and swung around a distant white dwarf star. It was mostly used by civilian traders but also acted as an auxiliary outpost for the Expansionary Defense Fleet. As such all visitors who set down in the station's docking bays were required to show an identification pass and ship register issued by the central government on Csilla.

It would have been possible to forge those things and get aboard, but the Sith had an easier method. The *Intruder*, Darth Kheykid's black flying wing, had simply slipped up to the station unnoticed, attached itself to one of the auxiliary airlocks, and opened it.

Kheykid stayed aboard his ship, of course. Darth Avanc and Serissa Lohr would have been able to pass as Chiss with a little make-up and red eye-lenses but they too had remained; Terrid was all they needed for this mission.

On their way here he'd allowed himself to wonder, with a touch of apprehension, whether his returns to Chiss space after twenty years would unearth buried emotions. As he walked the station's halls, anonymous and unremarked upon, he found that while they stirred memories they stirred nothing else either. All these little things he noticed, the trademarks of Chiss society that he'd taken

for granted his first thirteen years, were little more than curiosities. They felt like relics from another life, which they very much were.

He was relieved by that because it allowed him to concentrate on his mission. It was easy enough to find out which parts of Cam'co station were off-limits to non-military personnel. It took only a little more effort to find a place far-off from the crowded sectors where a single guard stood sentinel in front of a door marked for authorized personnel only. Terrid noted the single holocam placed above the door, blurred it with a pulse of Force energy, then walked toward the guard while feigning confusion.

"Excuse me," he said, "I think I'm having some problems. I think I'm lost."

The guard, all stern Chiss discipline as expected, snapped, "This is a restricted area."

"I know, I'm very sorry. You see, I'm supposed to meet someone at the administrative annex, wing 17."

"The administrative annex is on the rimward side of the station," the guard said.

"Can you be a little more specific?" Terrid took another step up, close enough.

"You can find a map of the station at any of the public information terminals." The guard betrayed a hint of annoyance he showed more clearly in the Force.

"Can you direct me to the nearest one? Please, this is my first time off Rentor and I'm a little overwhelmed."

The guard opened his mouth for a few more terse words but Terrid held up his hand. The guard froze. Terrid stepped very close and whispered, "Give me your identicard."

Force suggestion did the rest. The guard's hand went to his uniform pocket. He steadily drew out his card.

Terrid said, "Open the door for me." The guard pressed his palm against the DNA scanner, then tapped his card against the reader. The door hissed open. Terrid plucked the card from the guard's hand and said, "At your post, soldier."

The soldier did as he was told. Terrid slipped into the hallway beyond and reached out with the Force. He sensed no other

presences nearby and continued forward. He had no idea what the layout of the military wing was and finding a proper node might be difficult; he stayed alert at all times and followed signs where he could find them in the winding corridors.

Most of the CEDF staff were clearly off on ships patrolling the border; it was the only way to explain how empty this wing was. When he felt a dim sentient presence- two beings, by his guess- he stalked carefully toward it. As he worked his way through the corridors the signs marking a data access terminal seemed to follow him. All the better, he thought.

To get into the data center he had only tap his stolen identicard; security was more lax past the outer firewall. The door opened and he walked in on the backs of two CEDF technicians who were facing their consoles, one male, one female. They swung in their seats to face him as one; they'd clearly not been expecting a visitor. Surprise was good; they dropped their guard as Terrid reached out to touch both their minds at once.

He flashed his identicard too fast for a good look and said, "I am Subcommander Shank'narl'csapla, intelligence division. Please provide me with a datacard containing the most recent hostile fleet movements outside Ascendancy space."

The male technician frowned. "Can we see that identification again, sir?"

"You already saw it once. Do you *always* need to see things twice, lieutenant?" Terrid said it with an authentic-sounding haughtiness and a touch of Force suggestion.

"You're right, it checks out," the tech looked to his partner. "Prepare a data report for the subcommander."

The female tech got to work. Once he used the Force to suppress their suspicion he barely had to use any more effort; the natural obedience drilled into Chiss soldiers did the rest. When she was done the tech handed him the datacard and asked, "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No. Take your stations."

"Yes, sir," they snapped quick bows and went back to their seats. Terrid considered using the Force to clear their memories but

decided against it; a memory-wipe required effort and he wasn't certain he could do two at once; it wouldn't matter either way. In fifteen minutes he'd be away from Cam'co station and away from his old people forever.

Not that they'd ever been his people in the first place, he thought as he retraced his steps, exited the military wing, and returned the guard's identicard. Even as a youth he'd felt bound-in by the strictures of Chiss society. He'd longed for more power, more freedom, and when the shocking offer had come to leave the Ascendancy and train as a Jedi he'd took it. He'd been just thirteen at the time, an immature boy, but he'd known his own mind. Terrid respected that, at least, of the person he'd once been.

When he returned to the auxiliary airlock *Intruder* was still there. Kheykid warmed the engines for takeoff as soon as he was aboard. The stealth ship was not large; all it contained was a command section, a small cargo chamber, and a barracks barely big enough for two sets of bunk-beds. The cockpit felt crammed when Terrid joined the rest of them to explain what he'd found.

"The information seems to be in Cheunh," Darth Avanc observed when Kheykid plugged the datacard into the ship's main computer.

"Of course it would be," Terrid said. "Give me time. I'll translate it all and find the important information."

"What qualifies as important information?" asked Serissa Lohr. The former princess still bore fading bruises and scars from her encounter with the strills; they darkened her pale face and added something dangerous to her otherwise beautiful appearance. She'd been resentful and sullen the entire trip and hadn't the skill to hide her feelings in the Force. It was for that reason that the three Sith could also sense her grim resolve and were not worried. Even if the girl was still struggling with the ramifications of her choice, she knew there was no turning back from the one she'd made.

"The Chiss never attack preemptively," Terrid told her, "But they also have extensive intelligence. They'll know what systems and hyperlanes the raiders having been using to move around. We need

only decide the right place for an ambush and set ourselves to wait for the right prey."

"And what will our prey gain us?"

"They will lead us to *their* masters," Darth Kheykid hissed. "Then we will find the truth."

Serissa nodded. "I understand. What do we need to do before we act?"

"I will translate the data and select our best target," Terrid said. "*You* will undergo combat training with Darth Kheykid. When we make our ambush you will fight along with us."

The girl nodded stiffly to hide her fear. On Hapes she'd had no experience with non-humans, especially not ones as fearsome in appearance and naturally lethal as Kheykid.

The Barabel rose from the pilot's seat. "Come," he said, "We will work in the cargo hold."

Kheykid led; Serissa followed. Very soon they'd hear the sound of metal practice poles clacking against each other, and shortly after that the sound of the girl's body smacking hard on the durasteel deck. The ceremonial combat training she'd received as princess had taught her fine form, but she was only slowly finding the inner fire that marked a true Sith.

"It is a start," Darth Avanc said in a low voice. There was too little privacy aboard this ship.

"The information, or the girl?" asked Terrid.

"Both. Did you kill anyone aboard the station?"

"I only used Force suggestion." He felt like Avanc was judging him and added, "It was not for sympathy with those people. It was simply the easiest way to get things done."

"I believe you," said the Keshiri, and Terrid wasn't sure if he lied.

"They were as they always were," Terrid added. "Rigid. Ordered. Cold. Obedient. There's little ambition or passion among them. It's no wonder Sith are so rare here."

"Indeed," Avanc sniffed. "I'll leave you to your translations, Darth Terrid. I'd like to see if our former princess is finding *her* passion."

He rose and stepped out of the cockpit, leaving Terrid alone. The first crack of metal on metal resounded through the ship. He set it in the back of his mind and went to work.

The plan had been to use a slow and cautious approach on the planet the Chiss had identified as Karn'Erath. There was no telling what kind of armaments this world, apparently central to the raiders' mysterious crusade, might have. Yet even before Allana's Hapan shuttle first dropped out of hyperspace beyond the edge of its solar system, she had a feeling something was off. It was more than just the Force; the thought that had been nagging at her this whole time was how strange it was that the apparently flagship of the enemy fleet was the only Erath vessel they'd encountered. It made no sense that she could find, unless the raiders had somehow hijacked the ship for their own purposes and no actual Erath were involved. That seemed unlikely, but as they edged closer to the planet through a series of cautious micro-jumps she began to suspect it might be close to the truth.

When it became clear that no mighty warships or defense stations were circling around Karn'Erath, Master Rovurn Qel gave the permission to take the final micro-jump into the planet's orbit. Rollranarra, to whom Allana had ceded the controls of her ship, gave an affirmative Wookiee roar and sent them skipping ahead one last time.

From orbit, Karn'Erath looked like a relatively hospitable planet. Allana could see great swathes of ocean, especially in its northern hemisphere, and several distinct continents with broad washes of desert-browns but also the greens of forest and plain and dotted white of ice-capped mountains.

Allana glanced at the sensor feed. "Atmosphere is within breathable limits. We're picking up artificial metals too, in large clusters. Looks like cities and scattered towns, especially on the big southern continent."

"I can't see any ships in orbit. Is anything in the atmosphere?" asked the fourth member of their team, a young human knight named Cenya Valiss.

"Nothing I can see. Should we get closer, Master?"

Qel nodded, the leathery brown skin of his face crinkled in a frown. "Take us toward the largest city."

Rollra pitched them into an atmospheric dive. As they got closer to the city Allana began to run more thorough sensor-readings. To her surprise, there were no significant heat emissions from the city, which would have been expected from a major industrialized urban settlement. She didn't pick up any stray energy readings either.

"It's almost like the city's been abandoned," Allana muttered.

Rollra roared a question. Qel said, "Take us as low as you can. We might have to rely on our eyes for this."

"And the Force?" asked Valiss.

Qel turned his eyes on the young blonde woman. "What does the Force tell you?"

She blinked. "Nothing yet. I don't sense anyone down there."

"Nor do I. That could mean there's do one down there. It could also mean the Erath are invisible or near-invisible to our senses like the Yuuzhan Vong."

Rollra grunted that it could mean just about anything.

"Exactly," the Weequay said. "Allow nothing to cloud your judgment. Wait, watch, observe."

As the shuttle soared low over the city they did just that. It had clearly been a major settlement for a modern, high-tech civilization. They soared between great towers that rose almost a kilometer high and dipped low over roads so broad a dozen landspeeders could fit side-to-side. Yet for all of that they spotted no glowing lights, no people, no speeders on those roads. The buildings' once-fine metal surfaces seemed tainted by rust and weather. Many of their windows were shattered but there were no overt signs of violence.

"It's like someone just abandoned the place," muttered Valiss.

"How long ago do you think?" asked Allana. "A few years, maybe? It's hard to tell..."

Rollra trilled in alarm and kicked the shuttle in a tight circle. Allana barely held on to the back of the Wookiee's pilot chair and yelped, "Whoa, hold on! What do you see?"

"Something on the ground," Qel said. "I saw it too."

"Something or *someone*?" asked Valiss.

Rollra implied the latter as she killed the shuttle's engines and kicked in the repulsors. She circled low over what had once been a public plaza the size of a star destroyer's hangar deck. The shuttle lowered landing skids and rattled as it set down but no one moved for the exit.

Allana scanned the plaza and the surrounding buildings but found nothing. She was about to say so when a small shadow moved at the base of a dilapidated tower. Valliss pointed. The rest stared as a few more shadows moved at once. They sat and watched for another five minutes until four dark-cloaked figures began to creep across the plaza toward the shuttle. Their motions seemed jerky and hobbling; Allana spotted no weapons and through the Force she could, very dimly, sense curiosity without the intention to harm.

"We should go meet them," Valiss said.

Qel threw up a hand. "Stop. Allana, what do your atmospheric scans say?"

She glanced at her console. "Same as before. Oxygen-carbon dioxide-hydrogen mix, well within standard breathable range."

"Scan for toxins or poisons. Rollra, bring up enhanced visual scanning. Give us a better look at those newcomers."

As the Wookiee worked the controls Allana reported, "No toxins or poisons reported."

"Nothing the computer would recognize," muttered Valiss.

Rollra brought up the holographic viewscreen and showed and zoomed-in image of the four cloaked figures now crouching fifteen meters directly in front of them. They were from a rare Allana had never seen before, but even then she could tell they were sick. Only their mostly-humanoid faces were visible beneath the cloaks; as described, the Erath had skin with an almost liquid-rainbow sheen to it and bulging compound eyes like an insect's. What stood out where the ugly growths, different on each face, that looked like rough dark scar tissue swelled like tumors that tore through the

skin. All four of the aliens kept staring straight at them, vague anticipation on their scarred faces.

"We should get in vac suits," Qel said. "Rollra, stay behind in the shuttle. Monitor all scanners and prepare a decontamination procedure for when we come back into the ship."

It took them almost ten minutes to strap into the bulky suits. They'd been designed to protect from the cold of the vacuum, not potential atmosphere-borne diseases, but they did the job all the same. Still, as they exited one-by-one through the side airlock and clambered down the ladder to the dusty plaza, Allana couldn't help but wonder how frightened they must look to the aliens there were approaching.

The Erath, however, did not cower. Whatever had become of their civilization they'd been space-farers once and they knew vacuum suits when they saw them. When the Jedi got close Qel said aloud, "Your turn, Jedi Valiss."

The young woman was from a small colony world on the edge of the Unknown Regions and had picked up some Sy Bisti as a child. It was the reason they'd brought her on the team despite her limited experience. She stepped up to the Erath slowly, hands held up in a sign she meant no harm. The aliens flinched when she got close but did not retreat.

As Valiss began talking to them over her suit's external speakers Allana scanned the broad plaza and the towering buildings around it. After ten or twenty standard years without maintenance those mighty structures would fall. This whole city would crumble.

Valiss was conversing with one of the Erath now, and back-and-forth that made Allana feel a little heartened against it all. The scene around them was grim but at least they stood to get some answers.

When the conversation seemed to lull Qel asked, "What have they told you so far?"

"It's a little tricky," Valiss sighed. "My Sy Bisti isn't great and I think theirs is worse."

"Still," Allana pressed, "What *happened* to this place?"

"A plague, obviously. They said there's no defense against it. Billions have already died."

"Are there more people in this city?"

Valiss took a broad look around the plaza. "They say there's plenty more. Just hiding."

Being watched like this never put anyone at ease. Allana asked, "When did the plague start?"

"Less than two years ago. I'm not positive, but I *think* they're telling us we have nothing to fear from it."

"How do they know that?" asked Qel.

"I think they're saying it was *made* for them."

Allana understood the implication: a bioweapon. That would explain why only one Erath vessel was with the raider's fleet. At the same time it made no sense; the raiders possessed little visible finesse or technological skills. If they'd wanted to destroy a planet they would have simply bombed it to a cinder.

"Who?" she asked.

Valiss relayed the question. Instead of getting a simple answer a long awkward conversation between the Jedi and the Erath ensued. Allana understood nothing of the words but frustration leaked into both their voices.

Eventually Valiss sighed and said, "They're saying *they* did this to themselves."

"You mean it was an accident?" asked Qel.

"No. They talk about punishment. I think they mean that one of their own people did this to them. But who would genocide their own people?"

"Is it *just* one of them?" asked Allana. "A certain group? A faction in a war?"

"Can they give us a number, either general or specific?" Qel suggested.

That set off another labored exchange. When they started getting frustrated again the lead Erath started gesturing with her hands, jutting one finger each up to the sky.

"Two?" said Allana. "Is that what she's saying? Only two people did all this?"

"I think she means... Two people were the *leaders*."

"A king and a queen," Allana muttered, remembering the intel Jaina had relayed.

"Ask them," said Qel. "Did two of their leaders do this to them?"

The next exchange seemed a little smoother. Valiss told them, "You're right. It was their leaders. One male, one female. They make it sound like they did this to the Erath to punish them. For disobedience."

"This is very important," said Allana. "Where are this king and queen now?"

After a few more words Valiss translated, "The king and queen rose from nothing. They were just two normal citizens and they took over the whole world, the entire Erath race, and ruled like tyrants."

"But what *happened* to them?"

Valiss looked back to the Erath and exchanged more, like she needed to confirm something. Then she said, "After they poisoned the planet they got in its greatest warship and left."

"How long ago?" asked Qel.

"Less than two years." Valiss didn't have to ask on that one. "Master, they must have started here, but we have no idea *how* they took over Karn'Erath, let alone all those different species that make up the raiders."

"Did you *ask* her?" said Allana.

"Yes, but I can't figure out what they mean. They just say the king and queen got everyone to support them. They make it sound like everyone went mad or got brainwashed and all they could do was obey."

"Sounds like that may be Force-users," Allana breathed.

"Very powerful ones," Qel nodded, "But the Imperial knights haven't reported sensing a Force presence from that ship."

"None of them got close and they were already in the middle of a crazy, chaotic fight," Allana reminded.

"Are we thinking *Sith* here?" Valiss spoke the name in a dreaded whisper; it made her seem even younger.

"The Sith have been trying to destabilize the galaxy for decades," Allana said bitterly. "This is exactly what they'd do."

"They'd also have to find two Erath all the way out here and train them. Maybe they're some other kind of Force-user. We don't know what kind of schools or systems they use out here."

"Remember what I said in the shuttle," Qel reminded them. "Observe and consider but assume nothing."

"If not Force-users then what?" asked Allana. "Some kind of telepaths?"

"Maybe. Or even just exceptionally charismatic leaders."

"Charismatic enough to unite a dozen species that normally can't stop fighting each other and turn them into an invasion force, all in about a year's time?"

"Point taken," Qel grunted. "We should keep our minds open, but act on the likelihood these leaders are Force-users."

"Great," Valiss said. "So now what? Hope Masters Saar or Saaev'tu find this ship?"

"I don't think we'll find it here. We should get back to the shuttle and contact the other teams. They're more likely to track the enemy down."

"And then what do we do? Will a dozen Jedi be enough against these... these things?"

"Observe, consider, don't assume, Jedi Valiss," Qel said tersely. "For now, let's aim for a sitrep."

"Wait," Allana said. "These people..."

"We can't do anything for them now. I'm sorry. When we get back to civilization, we can put together a mercy mission."

"I can do more than that," she said as she looked at the broken, pleading faces of the afflicted Erath. "I've still got pull on Coruscant. I can get Kyrr Esch to authorize an emergency medical response on Karn'Erath."

"Even if it puts Alliance personnel at risk from the raiders?" Qel asked.

"Kyrr knows his government had to show moral leadership. He'll do it." She added, "Maybe we'll have this king and queen taken care of before it gets to that point."

"We can only hope," Valiss said, like anything else was beyond them.

"Tell them we're sending help," Allana told her. "Tell them we can't promise miracles, but we won't forget about them either. We'll do everything we can."

Valiss nodded and she explained as best she could in Sy Bisti. The Erath didn't interrupt, didn't ask questions, didn't do anything until she made clear she was done. That was when they fell to their knees and prostrated themselves before her. The young woman's jaw dropped in shock; then her face flushed in embarrassment.

Allana, though, felt absolutely humbled. As Hapan princess, Alliance Chief of State, and Jedi knight, there had been many moments where other beings placed their deepest trust in her. This was different. She'd just been weighted with the life or death of an entire *species*. She felt weak at the knees herself.

As if he'd sensed it, Qel placed a firm hand on the shoulder of her vac suit and said, "Come, both of you. The hard work is just beginning."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Life in the Jedi academy on Bastion was, for all its challenges, ordered and secure and set apart from what was going on in the rest of the Empire. When they'd been younger, Marin and Vitor had found that comfortable enough. Now that they were getting older what had once seemed safe was starting to feel stultifying, and the only solution was escape.

There was no rule keeping Jedi apprentices from leaving the academy grounds and going into nearby Ravelin, but generally they only went when accompanied by an older knight. With almost everyone away with Davek's fleet there were few of those around, and all their times was taken up by training the younger apprentices.

It was, therefore, actually a little easier to slip away this time. Marin's mother had been called away to meet somebody, somewhere, about something she didn't say. Jaina was busy teaching. It was simple enough for Marin and Vitor to slip out of their white tunics and into causal street clothes and walk out of the temple.

It was a fair walk to the maglev line that took them toward Ravelin's towering spires. Once aboard they sat down on benches and watched the city creep up around them as the train filled with

people. Vitor felt anonymous and ignored and normal; the fact that he had the weight of his lightsaber tucked hidden in his jacket and pressed against his chest added an additional excitement. Through the Force he could tell Marin felt the same way.

When they alighted in the heart of the city, they took to walking like they had the other times they'd sneaked away. The elevated walkways snaking around the skyscrapers' bases were thick with beings of all kinds, mostly human but with non-humans sprinkled in. Some were well-dressed businessbeings, some wore drab military garb, many wore casual civilian clothes like Vitor and Marin. Again, nobody looked at them twice.

Vitor knew Marin liked doing this because it was exciting; everything felt staggeringly different from the Jedi academy. Vitor liked it for that reason and more. The Jedi said that their role was to serve the Force and protect people. That only really sunk in for Vitor once he'd started coming here. As he watched all the beings moving about Ravelin he felt swelled with pride and responsibility: here were the people he was meant to protect. These were the ones Jedi existed to serve, the ones he would serve once he attained full knighthood.

They'd wandered the streets and walkways of Ravelin for close to an hour when they noticed the police hovercars circling over the towers nearby. When he reached out with the Force Vitor sensed, too a kind of new anxiety in the beings around them. People walked faster and looked straight ahead; nobody even glanced at the two teenagers. Everybody acted like they needed to be somewhere else.

Vitor didn't understand it but Marin tugged on his sleeve and said, "Come on. Let's get a closer look."

They walked against the flow of people, toward the whirr of overhead police cruisers. They reached a spot where Ravelin's administrative offices looked down from high towers on an open plaza as wide as a city block. The plaza was full of people, all swarming around a statue raised in the plaza's center. Vitor knew from previous visits that the statue was of a long-dead moff named Ardus Kaine.

Vitor knew his history lessons. Kaine had been a Bastion native who'd turned this planet into the center of his personal empire after Palpatine's death. He'd ruled with a typically old-style Imperial iron fist but avoided conflict with other warlords until the New Republic had him assassinated. To some he was effectively the founder of the current Imperial state and a martyr to Alliance schemes; to others he was a symbol of the bad old days of dictatorial rule. Vitor's grandfather had seemed ambivalent about him but it looked like the people in the crowd had found things to get excited over. They were holding up placards and long banners with hand-scrawled text and making so much noise Vitor and Marin couldn't tell what they were shouting. Instead the apprentices stayed on the walkways overlooking the plaza and watched as another crowd of beings filed in.

He didn't need the Force to feel the tension ratchet up. People were yelling at each other; someone was banging a drum. He spotted police units ringed around the plaza, shifting anxiously, looking at each other like they weren't sure what to do.

"Hey," he whispered to Marin, "Maybe we should get out of here."

She frowned. "I want to get a little closer."

"This doesn't look like a thing you want to get close to."

"I just want to know what it's all about."

"Lots of people getting angry."

"Yeah, but *why*? Come on."

She made for the nearest stairs and tugged him by the jacket-sleeve. As they trotted down to ground level more people were arriving carrying banners that read Justice for Valc VII and Punish Kaleesh. They found themselves swept along with the flow to the center of the plaza. Pressed in on all sides Vitor felt a spike of panic and grabbed onto Marin's arm to keep from being pulled apart.

Someone near them, a leader of the group, started yelling into a portable speaker that projected his voice across the plaza, saying, "We want justice for our dead! We want the alien traitors in our midst held accountable!"

People raised fists and shouted approval. Anger welled around them, strengthened by the pain of loss. The group's leader kept going, shouting, "The government has *not* gone far enough! Our dead have *not* been avenged! They can smash all the invaders they want but they still won't solve the problem of the traitors at home!" More shouts; some sounded for, some against, Vitor didn't now anymore. He tugged Marin hard and tried to pull her away, toward the plaza's edge.

"The government needs to take direct action!" the leader kept shouting. "Avaris needs to follow the example of the great Grand Moff Kaine! Lock down alien planets! Make sure they stay loyal and *punish* the ones who aren't before they kill thousands more Imperial citizens!"

More people shouted and raised their fists in the air like they could punch the sky. Vitor looked up at the fists and the slow-circling police hovercars; then he spotted something small and dark arcing fast through the air.

By the time he realized what it was, it was too late. The grenade went off in the midst of the crowd. The concussive force knocked hundreds of people to their feet and sent others running. Vitor and Marin were pulled in opposite directions by the directionless surge of the crowd. He called for his cousin but couldn't hear anything from the ringing in his ears. He reached out with the Force but that too was useless against the sea of panic and anger in which he flailed.

He tried to stand his ground and find calm in the chaos but people kept pushing him so hard he could barely stay upright. High-pitched screams pierced his explosion-dulled hearing. He spun around as the mob kept turning him, tried to find the source of the noise but found nothing at all.

Someone came out of nowhere and shoved him hard. He finally lost balance and fell; the people kept surging around him. Boots pounded pavement inches from his face. He tried to put hands on the ground and push himself up but a foot came out of nowhere; it smashed down onto his left arm, cracked bone, and was gone. Pain shot through his body and he couldn't even hear his own screams.

Dimly he realized he was probably going to die like this, tramped by a mob he wasn't part of, sentenced to death for nothing worse than curiosity. Some fate for a Jedi. Some fate for his parents' son.

Then the people around him were thrown away as if by a great gust of wind. He rolled onto his back, cradling his arm. Marin suddenly appeared above him, grabbing his shoulders and shouting something; first he thought it was his name but then he realized she was apologizing over and over with tears in her eyes.

She dragged him to his feet and with the aid of the Force, frantically called upon, she helped haul him away from the center of the plaza. Somehow they escaped onto a side alley before the pain was too much and they collapsed against a wall.

"I'm so sorry," Marin panted. "We should have never gone down there! I was stupid! I-"

"It's okay," Vitor said, though it wasn't at all. "We need to... Get out of here... Get back to the academy..."

"You're in no shape to move. You-"

Something rattled in the distance. Laserfire, though whether it came from the police or someone else, they didn't know. Wind blew through the alley and smelled of ash. Above all the other noises they could hear the continuous scream of police sirens.

"Oh, oh sithspawn," Vitor moaned as he cradled his broken arm. "Our parents are going to kill us."

Marin looked out the alley mouth at the chaos beyond. "Maybe. But I think there's bigger problems right now."

The hardest part had been learning the systems for the captured Vagaari and Stromma vessels. After that it was simply a matter of picking the target, and Moff's Veers had already provided Damien with a list of the Chiss' most vulnerable border outposts. The one that particularly stuck out was a station called Cam'co that orbited a white dwarf star. A civilian outpost normally guarded by a sizeable military component, the Chiss navy had been drawn elsewhere to patrol spots on the border where raiders' fleets were amassing. For the five vessels they'd captured- a relatively small attack force- it was no difficult job to sneak behind Chiss lines and stage an attack.

The Mandalorians had a reputation as fast, vicious, almost animalistic fighters, but in his time with Gevern Auch's company Damien had learned they were more than that. They laid down specific plans with utmost care and even ran battle simulations to predict the outcome of their attacks. Profit and professional pride were big for them; they knew all the blood and sweat they'd put into this project wouldn't matter unless the final step was done right.

Compared to the large force of warships and commandos that had actually captured the alien ships, this operation required far less manpower. They'd selected two Vagaari gunships to survive the fight and had thus stuffed them full of Mandalorian crews. The others they'd marked expendable and had instead hooked advanced slave circuits into the alien computers. When the Chiss combed through the wreckage of the raider's ships they'd find thousands of dead Vagaari and Stromma, all kept aboard their ships, sedated or restrained but alive so skillful Chiss medical examiners would confirm they'd died at the same time as their ships.

It would be an incredibly complex and choreographed show, all put on for the benefit of the few Chiss they'd planned to leave alive once the attack on Cam'co Station was done.

Damien was among them once again, to watch it with his own eyes and make sure it was all done right. The command deck for the Vagaari gunship was crammed claustrophobically tight with armored bodies. He did his best to stay close to Auch's, which wasn't difficult in this crammed space. The Vagaari apparently did not believe in chairs, because all the Mandalorian crew stood at their stations, strapped close to their consoles by semi-elastic crash webbing that locked around their torsos. It was an arrangement that made no sense for human physiology, but Damien and Auch's had agreed that refitting these cockpits would waste time and energy they couldn't spare.

When the time came to revert to realspace Auch's did Damien the favor of holding up one hand to count seconds on folding fingers as he surely talked through last-minute checks with the other Mandos on their internal helmet comms. As Auch's counted

down Damien found himself speaking the numbers aloud, just to fill the bridge's eerie silence.

"Four... Three.... Two," he whispered, then, "Showtime."

The gunship dropped out of hyperspace with the circular space station dead ahead. The Vagaari ship had no tactical display he could see so he had to track things with his eyes. The large Vagaari frigate and the unmanned gunship leaped ahead, engines blazing at full strength. He squinted through their thruster-flares and marked a handful of Chiss clawcraft on patrol rushing to vainly intercept. As expected, Cam'co station had meager defenses, but unfortunately none of their ships had the ability to pump out the potent comm-jamming signals the raiders had used at Valc VII and Kalee. If the Chiss wanted to call for help they could do nothing to stop them, which was why this attack had to be as fast as it was precisely merciless.

The automated gun turrets on the Vagaari ships did their job, tracking the clawcraft as best they could with spraying red bolts. The clawcraft broke into adept dodges and rolls to evade the laserfire, but the two manned Mandalorian ships came up behind them and began shooting out more accurate fire, including volleys of missiles that tracked the starfighters as they tried to evade. Damien saw one clawcraft disappear in an exploding fire-blossom, then turned his attention to the ships ahead.

The remote-controlled frigate and gunship charged ahead, into the station's defensive cannons. The guns were potent and so, he guessed, were its shields, but the automated ships didn't slow down. They rammed right into the defensive screens; the gunship went first and exploded brilliantly for all the extra warheads the Mandalorians had packed inside. That was enough to significantly weaken the shields and the larger frigate plunged right into the wounded defensive zone. It, too, exploded on impact but this time the shields were unable to catch all the fast-moving fire and debris.

Scorched shrapnel, some chunks twice the size of a snubfighter, ripped through the station's exposed hull. Metal sheared through metal; the superstructure buckled, spilling bodies and mechanical entrails into space. A station like that would have failsafes; armored

vacuum-proof bulkheads that would clamp down and seal off damages sections so the rest could be saved. With that in mind, they moved onto another section of the station and began attacking again.

The big Stromma vessel lurched forward to bring its heavy guns to bear on the battered station. The remaining clawcraft pilots seemed to now they couldn't stop it and instead concentrated their fire on the remaining Vagaari gunships. The command deck shook violently around Damien and he had to cling to the wall to keep from being knocked off his feet. He cursed the Vagaari aloud for not building ships with seats and looked out the viewport, through the scatter of laserfire across their forward shields, to see the Stromma ship's automated guns break through the station's shields and begin tearing more fiery holes in its hull.

Because the bridge had no tactical display and no voluble bridge chatter, Damien didn't know something was wrong until Auchs slipped beside him and said aloud, "A Chiss destroyer's just exited hyperspace. It'll be on us in four minutes."

He said it so smoothly, so matter-of-fact. "How are the hyperdrives?"

"Warming them up now. Estimated three minutes."

"Both gunships?"

"Yes. We're not in a gravity well so we can jump when you say jump."

He looked back through the viewport at the Stromma ship strafing the station. He had the tempting thought to turn the big vessel around and send it on a collision course for the Chiss destroyer, then decided against it. There was no telling what special weapons the Chiss ship might have. If it evaded and disabled the Stromma ship the Chiss would board and uncover the truth behind this elaborate charade.

He jabbed a finger out the window. "Are the explosives primed on that ship?"

"They are."

"Then ram it into the station and let's get out of here."

"Very good."

The Mandalore turned away and finished the job. He'd said four minutes until the Chiss destroyer reached them and it wasn't quite true; more speedy clawcraft lanced ahead and began to batter their shields. Vagaari ships were durable but if they stayed for much longer they'd be overwhelmed.

The Stromma ship did as it was told. The great barrel-shaped body swung toward the shield-less station and rammed into it, tearing through an entire hull section before the charges inside the Stromma ship detonated. The flare was blindingly bright but Damien barely caught it as the gunship veered away to evade three chasing clawcraft. As the surviving gunships swung around to align themselves for a hyperspace jump, he got one last look at their target. The collision had turned the entire station into a mass of twisted metal barely recognizable from its original state. Small explosions burst across its ruined body as remaining pockets of air combusted one after another. He doubted more than a lucky handful of all the thousands on that station would survive; they'd done more damage than he'd planned for.

Thankfully, Damien thought, they'd gained a new audience for the grand finale. The long dark dagger of the enemy destroyer flashed into view for one second before starlines stretched long and hyperspace swept them away, victorious, leaving the Chiss to rage, count their dead, and plot their misplaced revenge.

When news reached the *Makati* about the riots on Bastion it was bad enough; when he got a second call from his mother, explaining what had happened to Vitor and Marin, wanted to straight-up throttle someone.

"They made it back alright," Jaina's holo-image said as Davek, Arlen, and Marasiah gathered in the admiral's personal cabin. "The medical droid set Vitor's arm in a splint. He should be all right. Marin didn't sustain anything some bacta patches won't fix."

"What about Tamar?" Arlen asked. "Why wasn't *she* keeping track of our daughter?"

The old woman shrugged. "She left Bastion this morning but said she'd be back. She didn't say when."

"And you let her go?"

"She's our guest, not our prisoner."

"I know, I know," Arlen scowled. Davek didn't need the Force to know he and his brother were feeling the same things: shock, frustration, concern, helplessness, and anger at every party involved, including their children. For all their differences, the worries of a parent were universal.

Marasiah, surprisingly calm, asked, "Are they resting now?" It was the middle of the night in Ravelin as well as on the *Makati*.

"They are. Do you want us to call you again tomorrow morning?"

"That would be good, thank you," Davek said, then added, "Take care of yourself too, Mom."

She simply nodded. "I will. Thank you." Ever since his father's death Davek had found his mother even harder to read. Grief seemed to make her withdraw in herself.

When the transmission shut off there was a long moment when the three of them stared at their own feet, uncertain of what to say. Marasiah muttered, "It could have been much worse."

"They could have been killed," said Arlen.

"According to the most recent reports, over two hundred were," Davek sighed. "That includes the riots in Ravelin as well as other cities."

"What started all this?" asked Arlen. "I barely heard about it before... before Mom called."

"Ardus Kaine's birthday," Davek said dryly. "Some people used to as an excuse to hold rallies by his statue at the center of Ravelin. Other people held counter-demonstrations. Someone threw a grenade. We'll probably never know who. That started a stampede and more riots on other cities."

"What's Avaris said about this?" asked Marasiah.

"Nothing that I know of."

"Ardus Kaine was an old-style Imp authoritarian, but he was also practical," Arlen said. "He didn't massacre billions or enslave every non-human. He wasn't Palpatine or Tarkin. All this- two hundred dead, our kids hurt- happened over *him*?"

"Kaine was an excuse. When people are looking for a spark to start a fire they'll find one."

"No. There's more to it than that," Marasiah said softly, thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Arlen frowned.

She looked at one brother, then the other. "You two have a skewed perspective. The family you grew up in was, frankly, far from normal."

Arlen laughed dryly. "I won't deny it, but what are you trying to say? Our father—"

"Your father was a symbol in the eyes of the Empire's citizens. Now that he's gone he's even more of one. They could never know him as a person like you did. Jagged Fel was just a face on a holo, a projection. When people on Kolfax Minor argued about Jagged Fel they weren't arguing about *him*. They were arguing about the things they thought he embodied. The principals he represented in their minds. It was the same when they talked of Palpatine or Tarkin, or Kaine or Grand Admirals like Makati and Thrawn. None of them are *people* anymore. They're history, even your father, which makes them all symbols of something."

"Like what?" asked Davek. It was better to be interested in this than fume helplessly about Vitor.

Marasiah thought a minute. "Your father was a symbol of a state that was pluralistic, open, democratic. And he wanted to tear down everything humans had built up and turn us into an imitation of the Alliance."

Davek started. "That's not—"

She held up a hand. "That's what people *thought* your father meant. It was the different ways people wanted to see him. Just like Palpatine represented a strong, powerful, unified Empire that would never let a bunch of alien invaders ravage planets."

Arlen crossed his arms over his chest. "Right, he'd just blow up planets and massacre dissidents by the billions."

"But right now people want to feel safe," Marasiah said. "Palpatine would keep people safe. So long as they're the right *kind* of people."

"Obedient slaves to a Sith tyrant."

She shrugged as if to say, *That's one opinion*. Before Arlen could jump on her Davek said, "What about Kaine, though? Or Makati or Thrawn?"

"Kaine preserved the territory that became the core of our space. People respect him for that and frankly if it weren't for him the Empire might not exist at all today. They also see him as embodying the old militant Empire, and he was that too. As for Makati, I think most people see him as a gentleman-soldier. Thrawn was Thrawn. A genius and Imperial through-and-through."

"Also an alien," Arlen said.

"I've heard a lot of non-humans are starting to rally around him, actually. He's *their* symbol, an Imperial hero they can associate with." She looked to Davek. "People need heroes. They need symbols. They need something to align their life around. They can feel lost without them."

Davek thought on his last conversation with his father and felt unsettled. Jagged had posed him and Marasiah the question: what was an Empire without an emperor? They'd been searching for an answer to that question for almost a century and still they hadn't found it, leaving them open to confusion and disruption from all corners.

"I guess I can see what you're saying," Arlen admitted. "Who was *your* Imperial hero growing up?"

She looked down, suddenly embarrassed. Davek knew why; he'd gotten this confession before after dragging it out of her.

"Soontir Fel," Davek said for her.

He watched realization light on Arlen's face, followed by a grin. "Well," he said, "It makes sense you'd have good taste."

Marasiah still seemed too chagrined to speak; it was a rare sight and Davek couldn't help but smile too, despite all that was happening. He was about to suggest that the Force might have been giving her a taste of her future when his comm console buzzed. He stepped back to it and checked the readout.

"It's Aunt Wynssa!" he said.

Marasiah and Arlen fell in behind him. His wife asked, "Is this an official call or a personal one?"

"I don't know. I guess there's one way to find out." Davek tapped the console and the blue holo-image of a second old woman appeared before him.

"You caught us at a good time," Davek told his aunt. "What is it you're calling for?"

She didn't smile, not a bit. "Something critical has happened. I wanted you to be the first to know."

He stiffened. "Is it all right for Marasiah and Arlen to stay?"

"They'll hear it soon anyway. Admiral Fel, I'm officially informing you that, seven hours ago, a mix of Vagaari and Stromma vessels attacked and destroyed Colonial Station Cam'co."

He felt more stunned than anything since his father's death. Over his shoulder Marasiah asked, "Are you absolutely certain?"

Wyn nodded. "Three of their ships were destroyed in the fight. We've sifted through the wreckage and examined the bodies. There's no doubt. It was a completely unprovoked attack."

"How many were killed?" asked Arlen.

"We're still tallying numbers, but we project upwards of thirty thousand. I've just spoken with the leaders of the Seven Houses and they've agreed to authorize all CEDF forces for a retaliatory strike against the raiders. They've also authorized me to begin collaboration with our Imperial allies in exterminating this menace once and for all." Her blue holographic gaze fell on Davek and went hard. "We will do whatever it takes. The Ascendancy's dead will be avenged. And so will Jagged Fel."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When the information stolen from Cam'co Station led them true, there was no time for sneaking and no point in finesse. There was not even the desire. As much as this mission was about finding the truth behind these strange raiders it was also about testing Serissa Lohr to determine whether this Force-imbued Hapan princess was really the tool the Sith needed.

They parked themselves near the proper point, in an asteroid chain that belted the wide middle section of a nameless, lifeless star system. The raiders, it seemed, were using this belt to mine basic resources, and as *Intruder* drifted invisibly among all the slow-tumbling space rock they watched ship after ship move in and out. Most of them were large cargo vessels; some with on-board refineries. Those would be easier to take but there was no guarantee that the ship would contain a map of the raider-controlled systems in its navigational computer. There was no guarantee of that anywhere, and after deliberation between Terrid, Avanc, and Kheykid, it was decided the best course was to simply pick a tempting target and attack.

They did just that. The hauler they picked appeared to be of Pal'shoran design. Terrid vaguely remembered learning about the

race as a child and recalled that they were not normally warlike. The asteroids provided additional cover for *Intruder* as it sneaked up behind the mining ship, using bursts of small directional thrusters rather than flaring primary engines to get close enough to pounce.

In this asteroid belt the hauler kept its secondary shields up at all times. They were easy to breach but in doing so the Sith would alert the crew that something was wrong. For that reason it was important to move quickly. Once they clamped down over the ship's auxiliary airlock, Kheykid's vessel began cutting through the metal with a laser saw. It took less than five minutes; when the job was done the pressurized hatch blew open and the battle began.

As fights went there wasn't much too it. The first corridor was blocked by only a half-dozen Pal'shoran. The aliens were bulky creatures, with four legs on the ground and two arms to hoist up the long rifles they used. To the Sith they presented easy targets; Kheykid went first and speared one straight through the torso with the half-meter red blade that extended from above his right wrist. Avanc cut another through the neck, instantly dropped its clumsy blue-furred body. Terrid remained in the rear with Seriss, he with his red-bladed lightsaber, her with the long metal staff she gripped at the center with both hands. A blaster rifle was slung across her back.

Avanc and Kheykid cleared the initial defense team by themselves. As the Keshiri stood over the body of the last Pal'shoran- cleaved in half with a hard vertical blow- he turned to Kheykid and asked, "How many more?"

The Barabel lifted his head back and seemed to stare into the ceiling. He was a hunter both by nature and by training, unmatched at sensing the Force presence of potential prey.

"Thirteen or fourteen more," he rasped. "Three on the bridge."

"The rest are coming here?" asked Serissa.

Kheykid nodded. "Unless we go to meet them."

"Use your rifle," Terrid told the Hapan girl. "And be sure not to hit us."

Serissa nodded and switched weapons. As with using the pike, shooting targets had been a recreational activity among Hapan

royalty. It was well past time for her to use it against someone who shot back.

They advanced through the hallways once more. When they reached a branch point Kheykid reached to sense their enemies and decided they'd be coming from both directions. Avanc followed the Barabel down one path, Terrid led Serissa down another.

It wasn't long before they found more Pal'shoran. The aliens had brought some kind of shield that they placed in front of them to hide all but the crowns of their heads from view. A small horizontal slit through the center of the shield allowed them to spray laserblasts at an enemy who couldn't hit them back. Serissa tried; her rifle-shots whipped past Terrid with ease but panged harmlessly on the reflective armor of the shields. That meant it was work for Terrid; the Chiss somersaulted through the low-ceilinged hall, bouncing off the white-panel roof and ricocheting down to land behind two of the Pal'shoran. Twin thrusts with his blade dropped the aliens; a fast pivot barely deflected a shot from the third behind him. He pressed ahead, bouncing back more laser-shots until he was close enough to cleave the shield straight through. The attack clearly stunned the Pal'shoran; instead of taking a crucial open moment to pump a killing shot into Terrid's stomach it stared in shock. One more thrust with his saber and it was done.

"That was excellent, Master," Serissa told him.

Terrid looked back on the girl and glared. "I had to do it by myself. You should have been more useful."

"I-I'm not sure what else I could have done," the girl stammered. "The shields-"

He sighed. She was still hesitant, cautious, uncertain. She couldn't give herself over to her inner fire like a Sith could. That meant she'd have to learn the hard way, as he had.

"Let's go back," he said. "Kheykid told us there were only three in this hall. They've probably dealt with the rest now."

Serissa nodded, and together they turned to follow the trail of destruction Avanc and Kheykid had carved through the halls of the freighter. By the time they reached the cockpit Kheykid was carving through the blast doors with both his sabers.

"The rest of the ship is clear," Terrid announced. A tiny touch with the Force was enough to tell Darth Avanc that the Hapan girl hadn't yet been blooded.

When Kheykid broke down the door the remaining three Pal'shoran were waiting. Two had shields to hide behind but the third used a console as cover. Against three Sith they didn't last long. Avanc killed one, Kheykid the other. Terrid used the Force to hurl the last Pal'shoran away from its hiding place and out into the center of the deck.

"Do it!" he shouted to Serissa. "Kill it now!"

The Pal'shoran fumbled with its rifle, brought it up, and got off one shot at the same time Serissa fired hers. The girl's blast caught the alien in the torso. The pain was enough to drop it on its sides with a mighty clatter, though it still clutched the rifle even in its pain.

Another pull of the Force threw the rifle from its hands. Avanc and Kheykid stood clear. They knew what needed to be done.

Terrid stalked over to the wounded alien, crouched low over its flat blue-furred face and whispered in Chuenh, "Can you tell us where to find your leader?"

The alien blinked pupil-less eyes. It didn't understand. Pal'shoran traded with the Chiss; Terrid had figured trying the language might work. No matter. The ship itself was theirs now, including all the data on its computers; everything else flowed from that.

Still crouched, Terrid looked up at Serissa, who stood near the doorway with the rifle in both hands. He said, "Come here. Now."

Serissa stepped over, still holding the gun. She stopped right in front of Terrid and the wounded alien and looked down on them both.

"Kill him," Terrid said.

The girl shook, just a little. She'd been raised in a cruel and merciless family, even plotted to poison her own grandmother, but to stare a being in the frightened eye and put a laser-blast in its head was so very different.

Terrid knew. Darth Avanc had done the same to him long ago. Kheykid had been there as well. The three of them had boarded one of the petty pirate ships troubling freighters in the Hapes Cluster. The two Sith Lords had killed all the crew save for one. Avanc had called Ran'wharn'csapla over to the wounded man lying on the floor with helpless pleading in his eyes. And he'd said the same two words Terrid just had.

And Ran'wharn'csapla, still just a boy who thought of himself as a Jedi in his battered private heart, had looked down at that wounded man and desperately groped for any excuse not to do as Darth Avanc had ordered, knowing all the while that there could be none. Refusal meant death. It was kill or be killed and the broken pirate was dead anyway. From there, horribly and logically, only one option flowed.

Seeing it all repeated on Serissa's face was like reliving it again. It stirred his old self like nothing else on this trip into the unknown.

The girl hefted the rifle and aimed it straight at the terrified prisoner's head. With shaking hands and a tiny wince, she pulled the trigger.

Darth Avanc let the following silence drag for one long moment before he said, "Excellent. Now tell me, what is the creed of the Sith?"

It was the same question he'd asked Ran'wharn'csapla all those years ago. Like the Chiss boy, Serissa needed a moment to gather her thoughts and find her voice, but it was a short moment.

She closed her eyes and said, "Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion I gain strength. Through strength I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force will set me free."

"Excellent," Avanc smiled. "You have just broken one link. Soon you'll tear another."

Her face set into a hard scowl and she nodded. Just as Terrid had so long ago.

After the comet-scarred, lifeless rock they'd found in the last system Jodram hadn't been quite sure what to expect on their next stop.

He'd been more-than-half expecting a trap, which is why they took *Ossus Explorer* through a series of tentative micro-jumps around the coordinated the Tylonians had provided to scout the target from a distance. Still, when they took the final jump and their destination exploded into view, it took his breath away.

He couldn't start to count the number of ships swirling in orbit over the small lifeless planet, set close to its primary star. He was afraid to even look at his scanners for a tally. Fresh sunlight added a jewel-like gleam to the mess of vessels: Stromma, Vagaari, Pal'shoran, Tylonian, and more. Even at their distance Jodram could spot the black fleck, larger than them all, that was the Erath flagship.

Silence seemed to drag out in the cockpit until Ayen Qemar, blue hands still tight on the control throttle, said, "Well. We're here. Now what?"

They all waited for Master Sothais Saar to give them an answer. After ruminating for another long minute the Chev said, "Take us in close. Be alert for any hails."

Qemar did as ordered without a word. Among three Jedi, her anxiety was hard to hide. Lucky for her they all shared it, even the stony and determined Saar.

The swarm of ships quickly filled their vision. All the different types from all the different races were mixed together in no pattern Jodram could discern. After another order from Saar, Qemar started subtly edging them closer to the big Erath ship. No one hailed them the entire time.

"I really don't like this," Kath Mey'lya whispered in the silence. The fur on her face was standing on end. "If we have to run—"

"Look there," Saar pointed at the flagship. "Do you see? A few ships, small ones, are coming out of its hangar on the bottom."

Jodram squinted until he spotted it. They weren't flying in formation like fighter squads. As they got a little closer it looked like they were shuttles and freighters, around the size of *Explorer*.

"Master, are we doing what I think we are?" he asked.

Saar didn't respond at first. He stared so hard it carved deeper wrinkles in his chalk-colored face.

"Master?" Jodram said again.

Saar jerked like he'd received an electric shock. He looked around the cockpit, pausing on each Jedi in turn, like he was surprised to find them here, but in the Force Jodram felt nothing from him.

"Master Saar," Mey'lya said, "Do you have orders?"

"Take us in," he said.

"Sir?" Qemar stared. "That ship-"

"They'll let us land."

"How can you be sure?" asked Jodram.

"They won't stop us. They won't even hail us. Do you detect any comm chatter bouncing around, Tainer?"

Jodram looked at his sensor console. "Well, not that *we're* picking up, but that doesn't mean-"

"Take us in, Qemar. See if you can't find a small side hangar somewhere we can set down in, someplace private."

"And if they *do* try to stop us?" her voice trembled a little.

"Then prepare to run. And trust the Force."

Trust in *him*, Jodram thought. Qemar didn't look trusting at all, but she did as she was told and gently guided *Explorer* closer to the big Erath ship. Its dark superstructure filled their viewport but they made no attempt to hail and didn't fire, though by now they were close enough that Jodram could see all the bristling gunports that could fire at any moment.

"I really do not like this," Mey'lya whispered.

"Trust the Force," Saar repeated. He didn't seem worried at all. "There, do you see that small hangar?"

Qemar hunched forward and looked up. "I see it. It looks empty."

"Take us in."

The Nautolan pulled the throttle back and edged them forward. No guns swiveled to track them. Jodram checked his scanners; not even the shields were up. He tried to reach out with the Force to sense anything about the ship waiting above them but all he got was anxiety from Qemar and Mey'lya that blurred with his own. From Master Saar he got nothing at all.

The boxy grey-walled hangar surrounded them. Hands shaking a little, Qemar nudged them over an open deck, extended struts and killed engines. Repulsors lowered them to landing space with a gentle jerk. Then everything was still.

All four Jedi remained in the cockpit, looking out the viewport at the hangar's sole entrance on the opposite wall. The blast doors didn't open. No one came to meet them.

It was Mey'lya who finally said, "None of this makes sense."

"Maybe they're just.... Trusting?" Qemar said.

"Get your weapons, Jedi. Everything you think you'll need," said Saar.

"Wait," said Jodram, "What about the other teams? Should we send a signal to Masters Qel and Saav'etu?"

"Yes. Give them our coordinates and tell them to come right away. Say we'll need their assistance."

That made Jodram feel only a little better. As he prepared to contact the other teams Saar led two knights back to *Explorer's* cargo room. By the time the Jodram sent the message and joined them they'd all gathered their lightsabers and strapped plasteel body armor over their tunics. Saar had dropped his brown robe in a pool on the chamber floor, and the other had Jedi followed suit. Once Jodram did the same, Qemar lowered the ramp and all four Jedi stepped out into the empty chamber.

"No welcoming party," Mey'lya whispered, stating the obvious. "What sense does that make? What kind of security-"

Without warning Saar's lightsaber ignited in his hand and stabbed out and back, taking Mey'lya through the sternum. Jodram and Qemar stared in shock; the Bothan's jaw went slack as she looked down at the pillar of light that had suddenly thrust through her heart.

Then Saar withdrew it and she collapsed dead on the deck.

"Master!" Qemar screamed. "What are you doing?"

He hefted the weapon again. Jodram grabbed the Nautolan and pulled her away but Saar didn't move for another attack. He swung the blade up vertically, cutting a molten scar through the hull. He swirled his saber with a two-handed grip, cutting further lines into

Explorer, then pulled his saber out and, without even a gesture, sent a pulse of Force energy that sent Qemar and Jodram both skidding out from under the ship.

"Master!" the Nautolan shouted again. "How can-"

"Get up!" Jodram shouted and tugged her to her feet. He grabbed his lightsaber and turned it on. So did Qemar but Saar didn't seem to be paying attention to either of them. He swung his saber once more, a two-handed horizontal chop, and cut straight through the port-forward landing strut. He danced out from under *Explorer* as it tipped and toppled. Its cockpit nose scraped and crunched as it smashed onto the deck.

Jodram pulled Qemar another step back but again the Master wasn't concerned with them. With agility that seemed impossibly for his age he threw himself into the air and landed atop the slanted roof of the cockpit. He bent down over the viewport and placed one palm close over its transparisteel surface. A second later the viewport shattered as though he'd punched it with a massive duracrete fist. Still bent low he swiped down with his lightsaber, cutting through the consoles and sending out a rain of sparks.

"No escape!" Saar shouted. "Not for impostors!"

Finally he leaped away from the cockpit and landed nimbly on his feet in the middle of the chamber. Jodram and Qemar stood ten meters away, sabers ignited, confused and terrified but determined to defend themselves even though they knew they'd never muster the power to beat the old Chev, not even if they worked together.

They stared at Saar and he stared back; then he lowered his saber just a little and cried, "She's waiting! For all of us!"

And then he turned and sprinted for the exit. Jodram and Qemar didn't even try to follow him. They only watched him go.

When the door closed behind him Qemar said, "What the hells was that? He killed Kath, he-"

"No time." Jodram squeezed her arm. "We need to get back to the ship."

"But he-"

"There's an auxiliary comm system in the back he didn't smash. We have to warn the others. *Now*."

* * *

When they received the message from Master Saar's team they immediately set course for the coordinates embedded in the message. Allana didn't know what to think of the summary Jodram had sent. The fact that they'd simply set down aboard the Erath flagship without so much as a hail or a warning made no sense whatsoever.

The next message came not long after, and this one was a direct comm link to *Ossus Explorer*. When the voice came on, she almost didn't recognize it as Jodram's for the blur of static and the panic in his voice.

"-something wrong," he saw saying. "Master Saar- I don't know what happened."

"Speak slowly, Knight Tainer," Rovurn Qel told him. "Please, what happened to Master Saar?"

"He killed Kath Mey'lya! He disabled the shuttle and the ran-"

"Jodram, wait!" Allana said. "Do you say he *killed* her?"

"Yes! I don't understand, but he-" Static burst, muting his voice, then died again. "We can't fly out. We're stuck here. He disabled the ship."

"Where is Master Saar now?" asked Qel.

"He ran off! He said... He said we were impostors and left! He said someone was waiting for him, for all of us!"

"Impostors?" Allana felt a shiver run through her body. "He called you *impostors* and turned on you?"

"Did he say *who* was waiting for us?" Qel asked.

"He just said *she* was waiting. I don't know what that means."

"I think I do," Allana said. She couldn't believe it. It was a childhood nightmare manifested without warning. "Did you comm Master Saav'etu?"

"Not yet. I-"

"Don't," Allana said and felt the other three Jedi staring questions at her. "We'll see if we can get close and pick you up. Just hold position and defend yourselves if you can."

"Allana, do you know what's going on?"

"Not for sure. Just hold where you are, please. And good luck."

She shut off the comlink and another shudder ran through her; a feeling she'd never talk to Jodram Tainer again.

"What *is* going on?" asked Valiss. "How could Master Saar do that?"

Allana looked at Master Qel. "I hope to everything I'm wrong, but I think I know. It's awful, but everything makes sense."

His face stayed hard, rough, but she saw realization spark in his eyes. "Tell me."

"I saw this happen with my own eyes, back when I was a child. It's been almost fifty years and I never thought it would happen again."

"*What* would happen again?" pressed Valiss.

"It happened to Saar when he was younger. That must be why it's happening now. And Master Saav'etu. That's why we have to comm her and tell her to stay clear at all costs. Then we need to hail Arlen Fel and tell him exactly what we've found and where it is."

Rollra growled her confusion and begged for a clear answer.

Allana could barely say the name. "*Abeloth*. After fifty years she's back. Master Saar, the raids, what happened on Karn'erath. The king and queen. She's the cause of everything."

Valiss gasped. Rollra was so stunned she made no sound. Master Qel held Allana's gaze and slowly, grimly nodded. The old Weequay had also been alive then and he'd seen it all: the madness that overtook young Jedi who'd been sheltered in the Maw during the Yuuzhan Vong War, near the ancient prison where the Celestial races had imprisoned the deathless Force-empowered monstrosity called Abeloth. She'd called to the younglings, drawn them to her, and for the few unlucky enough to find her she'd sucked their souls away and embedded her hideous mind inside the husks of their bodies. Fifty years ago she'd nearly seized dominion over the galaxy and toppled the Jedi Order.

Now she was back again, at the heart of a storm.

When Jodram crawled out of the auxiliary maintenance station into the slanted deck of the shuttle's main hold the first thing he heard were clamping feet. He crept up on Qemar from behind as she

clung to the doorframe of the smashed-open cockpit. Over her shoulder he could see a group of alien soldiers, all in black armor and faceless masks, marching through the doors into which Master Saar had fled.

"Did you make contact?" Qemar whispered as they watched more soldiers fill the hangar.

Jodram had to find his voice. "Master Qel's on his way."

"We have blasters in the cargo hold, don't we? Something to defend ourselves with?"

Jodram had no idea how long they'd last against that much. He should have asked Allana how far away they were but he'd been afraid of the answer. "A couple rifles, I think."

"Then let's get them" Qemar said and turned away. It took effort to tear his eyes off the mounting enemy- there must have been fifty by now- but he followed and tried to keep from shaking.

The *Afsheen Makati* and the bulk of the Fourth Fleet had fallen back to Ord Thoden while the Second staged in another system and portions of the Third kept Kalee under lockdown. Davek was in the middle of reviewing the last batch of readiness reports from Farl Renwar's division when his brother came literally sprinting into his office.

Without rising from his desk Davek asked, "What happened? What's wrong?"

Arlen bent over, sucked in a few deep breaths, and said, "We've found the Erath warship. A whole fleet's bulked there. We need to go now."

"We?" It took a moment to compute. "Are you saying the *Jedi* found them?"

"That's right."

Since Davek had refused to share confidential intelligence with the Order he and Arlen hadn't spoken of the issue at all. He wanted to ask how in the nine hell the Jedi had found the raider base but didn't matter, not now. "Do you have the system marked?"

"Yes. Allana's on the way right now."

He had no idea the former Alliance Chief of State had gone on those missions. It seemed like a dangerous place to put so important a person and he couldn't believe Lowbacca had allowed it. "Tell her to hold outside the system. I'll launch a recon flight right away and scout the area so we can get a battle plan."

"You don't get it. There's no time."

"What don't I get? Arlen, I can't just charge in there! I have *millions* of soldiers I have to take care of!"

"Then I'm going. We can't waste a minute."

He spun for the door. Davek jumped up from his desk and shouted, "Wait!"

It was enough to stop his older brother. Arlen turned around. Breathlessness and panic were gone; the only thing left was durasteel-strong intent. "I can't explain now but I'm taking all the Jedi and going. Get your fleet ready. Call in Admiral Grave too. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"Arlen-" he began, but this time his brother didn't stop. Arlen marked right out the door, striding so fast it was almost a run. Davek stared at the blank shut door, shocked and uncertain, more than anything *angry* at his brother for his flagrant disobedience and utter refusal to explain himself.

But then he was a Jedi. That was what Jedi *did*. It was why they bowed to no government- not the Alliance or Empire or anyone else.

That was the Jedi Order, he reminded himself. He pulled out his comlink and quickly hailed his wife. A second later Marasiah said, "Davek? What's wrong?"

"Arlen's going to be down there in a minute. The Jedi have found the Erath flagship and a chunk of the enemy fleet. He's going there. *Now*."

"Now? Davek, what are *we* doing?"

We. The two of them- husband and wife- and the entire fleet. Marasiah was a Jedi Knight but she'd been Imperial military first.

He wanted to tell her to keep as many Jedi as she could aboard the *Makati*. Then he realized that wherever Arlen was going and

whatever mad thing he was about to do he'd be safer with more Jedi at his side.

"Go with my brother. Take every Jedi you can and keep him *safe*. And make sure the *Makati* has a homing lock on your location. Give us a live feed from your fighter so we know what we're getting into when we come in behind you."

"Are you taking the Fourth?"

There could only be one answer. "Yes, and I'll invite the Second and the Chiss too, but we won't get there before Arlen does. Stay with him, protect him—"

"I'll do it," she said, "As long as you're right behind me."

"You can count on it." Against everything, Davek smiled. "May the Force be with you."

"You too, Davek," she said, and the link shut off.

Davek stood in the middle of his office, deceptively quiet. Scrambling a massive fleet on short notice was effectively impossible. Too many ships were still in drydock, undergoing repairs or systems checks, undermanned for a dozen different reasons. If he was going to chase after his brother he'd have to figure things out as quickly as possible.

He went over to his comm console to patch a call to his aunt and prayed the Force really would be with them. They'd need all the help they could get.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The captured Pal'shoran freighter drifted slowly and unremarked into the great flotilla. Darth Terrid had heard about the damage these ships had wrought against the Imperials but never thought to calculate their strength until now. The sensors calculated well over one hundred ships visible on this side of the planet alone; they were a strange mix from a dozen different types, some he recognized from his teachings as a child and others unrecognizable. The great dark warship in the center stood out from the rest, and there was something vaguely familiar in its jagged shape. It tugged on memories, perhaps of long-forgotten history lessons in Chiss schools, and the nagging mystery made it more intimidating. Such feelings were unworthy of a Sith; he knew that well and tried to stifle them.

When they settled into a steady orbit over the planet, Darth Kheykid put the hauler on autopilot and rose from his chair.

"We are ready," the Barabel hissed.

"Are we all going aboard?" asked Serissa. The young woman had been quiet and sullen since taking her first life, but Terrid sensed no regret or indecision inside her. She was simply getting used to what she had done and what she was irreparably becoming, as he once had.

"All of us," Darth Avanc confirmed. "We have no more need of this ship."

"Is that why you've wired it with extra explosives?" Serissa crossed his arms beneath her breasts. "What do you expect to *do* with this ship?"

"Ram *that* vessel, if it will help. "Avanc pointed at the flagship. "Or perhaps not. It never hurts to be prepared, or to use all the tools available to you. Remember that."

"I learned *that* one a long time ago," she said coolly.

"Good. Gather your weapons and come to the *Intruder*. Once we're aboard that ship we'll find out what's really going on."

Allana's heart pounded fast in her chest as her shuttle neared the great raider fleet. Rollra was easing them into the formation as quickly and smoothly as she thought possible without risking attention. To Allana it felt painfully slow and nerve-rackingly fast at the same time.

As they got closer the Erath flagship became clearly visible. Once she'd marked it with her eyes it was impossible to look away. *Abeloth*. Fifty years ago that monstrosity had nearly killed Luke Skywalker, the most powerful Jedi she'd ever known. Ben had fought a version of her too. Tahiri Veila had done it twice. The Force abomination could spread her consciousness of multiple bodies and Allana had no doubt she had done so for both the so-called king and queen of the Erath.

She remembered that Abeloth's incredible power burned quickly through the bodies of non-Force users. Both the Erath she'd possessed must have been very powerful for her to retain their forms for several years. Now it seemed she was drawing Sothais Saar to her, whom she'd touched many years ago when he'd been a child in the Maw sanctuary. As a powerful and veteran Jedi his body would also last her some time. Worse, once she stole it, she'd possess a part of Saar inside her and have access to all his valued knowledge of the modern Jedi Order.

That was why she had to be stopped as soon as possible. Before entering the system they'd received a comm from Arlen saying he

was on his way with all the Imperial Jedi knights he could muster. She could only hope he arrived soon. There was no time to waste.

As they got closer to the fleet she dared reach out with the Force, uncertain what she'd find. She'd never been close enough to Abeloth to feel her before, something she'd been thankful for all her life. A light touch from her as a child had cursed knights like Saar to delusion and madness. She prayed the Jedi she was bringing now were similarly resistant. Qel had been an apprentice at the time but had had no contact with her; Valiss and Rollra had been born after Uncle Luke had beaten her into retreat. That meant they *should* be safe, but with Abeloth there was no knowing the limits of her power.

"Do you feel anything?" whispered Valiss. In the deathly silence of the cockpit they'd all be trying the same thing.

"I don't know," Allana whispered. "I've never *felt* her before."

"But you've felt the dark side."

She'd felt far too much of it, and far too early. "I don't think I feel that from the ship. I don't know if I feel anything. Not even Jodram or Ayen." She didn't want to add that they were quite possibly dead already. "What about you, Master Qel?"

The Weequay narrowed his eyes. "I think there is a darkness there... but it is faint."

Rollra groaned that *faint* was not something she'd associated with Abeloth.

"Abeloth could hide her presence so well not even Luke Skywalker could tell he was looking at her," Allana said.

"But we'll know when we find this one... Won't we?" asked Valiss.

Allana wasn't sure of that. She wasn't sure of anything, but Qel said, "When we find Master Saar we'll find her. In one form or another."

It was a grim thought and no one sought to add to it. As they flew closer to the Erath ship Allana checked the sensors. The raiders' vessels around them had mostly been keeping steady orbits around the planet, but she spotted two Tylonian ships behind them pick up speed.

"We might have a problem," she whispered. "Rollra, see off our aft-port? Think it's trouble?"

The Wookiee woofed agreement and flipped on the rear shields without breaking for a run. There was no certainty those ships were coming after them, but they had to be ready."

"Can we try hailing *Explorer* again?" asked Valiss nervously.

Allana tapped on the comm console and tried another hail, as she had when they'd entered the system. Again they got nothing. She dreaded the thought of going to Jade and telling her she'd let Jodram die; the thought that she was quite possibly flying to her death was even worse.

She'd faced lethal situations many times before, knowing every instance that being a Jedi involved putting your life on the line and even sacrificing yourself for others. Even her father, for all his many sins, had died for her sake in the end. It was, strangely, a thought to give her strength.

When she looked at the scanners again she knew she'd need that power. "Those Tylonian ships are closing in."

"Are you sure they're on our tail?" Valiss asked.

"I think- damn. They're starting to launch drones."

"And the *drones* are heading our way?"

"Looks like. Rollra-" Suddenly her screen lit up. She tapped the console, bringing up the broadest scan so she could see it all. A mass of warships was exiting hyperspace and falling inbound. They must have numbered several dozen and when the markers all turned blue she gasped aloud.

"It's the Chiss. They've brought a whole *fleet*."

"Chiss? How is that possible?" Master Qel said. "They'd never attack without provocation!"

"Well, maybe the raiders finally provoked them. Look, they're all breaking formation to counter the Chiss. We might-"

The whole shuttle shook as laser blasts splattered over their rear shields, ending her brief spurt of hope. Rollra gave a defiant roar and pushed the engines to full, charging straight toward the Erath ship even as it started to pivot and lumber toward the newly arrived foe. A few Tylonian drones whipped past the cockpit and spun

around for another pass, spitting out weak but myriad red laser blasts.

Rollra shouted for them all to hold tight to their seats and charged ahead. Alarms wailed. Smoke came from somewhere behind them. More laser blasts rocked the ship as their shields were buffeted to bursting but they dove on, zeroing in for their target as the great dark belly of the Erath ship eclipsed their vision and readied to swallow them whole.

Even crippled by multiple hull fractures and a smashed-open cockpit, *Ossus Explorer* made a surprisingly defensible redoubt. Its hull was highly resistant to small arms fire and the gaps in the hull were narrow enough to make excellent sniping positions for two Jedi armed with heavy-grade blaster rifles. Qemar placed herself behind the cockpit and sniped through the broken viewport. Jodram stuck the tip of his barrel through the rent-open floor of the cabin and picked off the surrounding soldiers one by one.

But in the end, they could only hold the enemy for so long. They had the broken ship surrounded and he could only watch as they dragged heavy repeating cannons into the rear of the hangar and set them up for use.

Over the constant crackle of rifle-shots strafing the shuttle, Qemar shouted, "Jodram! Do you see it?"

"Oh, yes."

"What do we *do*?"

All he could think was: *get ready to die*. That he still understood none of this- what had turned Master Saar, what this Storm King really was and why he was leading these savage attacks on Imperial worlds- was bad enough. Worse still was the thought of Jade, of Nat and Kol. That he'd never be there to help his sons grow up seemed crueler than death itself.

Then he felt something in the Force, a faint touch, almost distracted, but he knew it was Allana. She was close. She was coming.

"Hold on!" Jodram called. "Just a little longer!"

Qemar shouted something back but a great thunder burst through the hangar and everything around them shook violently. Peering through the tear in the hull saw a flash of flame and the gleam of metal, then heard a horrible scraping sound and the shocked cries of the soldiers arrayed around *Explorer*.

To get a better view he scrambled out of the hold and up to the cockpit. Qemar, apparently unafraid of being shot at, had hoisted herself through the threshold into the forward cabin. Jodram joined her, stepping carefully over the shattered transparisteel shards to see Allana Djo's familiar elegant and emerald-hulled shuttle smash nose-first into the opposite wall of the hangar, having already cut a scorched and smoking line through the deck and smashed dozens of black-armored soldiers on the way down. The remaining attackers were stunned and confused, half of them prone on the floor from the concussion of the shuttle's impact. Looking more closely at Allana's ship, Jodram saw that one of its aft engines seemed to have been blown out and its sleek dorsal fin was torn up by laser-blasts.

"We have to help them!" Jodram shouted. "Come on!"

He slung the rifle over his shoulder, grabbed his lightsaber, and ignited it as he threw himself through the broken viewport onto the deck. The soldiers still alive tried to put up a fight but they were stunned and injured; the two Jedi moved among them, nimbly slashing off the barrels of guns and knocking their would-be attackers away with kicks and Force-pushes.

As they neared Allana's shuttle the side airlock popped open and the first one to leap out was a ginger-furred Wookiee waving her arms and roaring at them to stay back. The Weequay Master Rovum Qel appeared next, followed by Allana and a young blonde woman Jodram vaguely recalled as Cenya Valiss.

There was no joy or relief at recognition. Rollra kept waving her arms at them while Qel and the others sprinted for the hangar exit. Jodram realized the shuttle's reactor must have been about to burst and followed them. He slowed just enough to make sure Qemar was on his tail, then threw himself through the door and into the access hallway. When Qemar jumped through a second later Rollra

slammed the controls with a furry paw and heavy blast doors slammed down, sealing them off from the hangar.

"Thank you!" Jodram panted. "Master Qel, Allana, what's going on? How did your-"

The entire hall shook so hard they nearly fell and the blast doors only half-muted the thunderous explosion in the hangar. If the shuttle's reactor blew it probably tore up the rest of the hangar and caused a breach in the atmospheric seal. The wreckage of both their ships, as well as all the dozens of soldiers who'd attacked them, were probably now gushing out into space.

"Well," Qemar sighed, "There goes our ride."

The realization that they were trapped here and still probably going to die killed all relief. Very seriously Jodram looked at Allana and Qel. "We have to stop Master Saar, don't we?"

"It's probably too late for that," Allana said. "But we have to try."

"Why?" pleaded Qemar. "What's going *on*?"

Reluctance passed between Allana and the Master, but Qel said, "I'll tell you as we move. We've lost too much time already."

When the two dozen Jedi-flown TIE Sabers reverted to realspace they fell immediately into a bedlam. Marasiah had been told to expect it; Davek had commed them while they were en route to say that a Chiss fleet, led by his aunt, would reach the designated system before they did. Still, the scale and ferocity of the battle shocked her. The Chiss were throwing themselves at their enemy with vengeful ferocity and the raiders were retaliating with their usual madness. The space around that small lifeless planet was a constant light-show of explosive bursts and lasers strobing red, green, and blue.

"We're heading for that Erath ship!" Arlen called to all pilots. By some small grace the raiders hadn't erected their usual comm-jamming field yet. "All ships, follow me!"

Marasiah checked her console to make sure the data from her sensors was being streamed back to Davek on the *Makati*, then plunged with Arlen and the other Jedi into the fray.

Their goal, as Arlen had explained during the lightspeed ride here, was to get aboard the Erath ship and aid the Jedi already aboard. Their enemy: the Force abomination known as Abeloth. When he'd said it Marasiah had barely believed. She'd felt the same shock and skepticism radiating through all the other Jedi as well. None of them had even been alive when Abeloth made her last appearance in the known galaxy. Marasiah had heard stories from her mother-in-law, who'd actually fought one of the creature's possessed bodies on Coruscant, but something in the back of her mind had never really *accepted* it all as fact.

Even after becoming a Jedi Knight there were still some things she couldn't believe really existed in the Force. This was one of them.

The military part of her was frustrated by that, and all the other unknown variables. TIE Sabers, unlike traditional fighters of the type, had been designed to land on any surface without needing the special racks that only Imperial capital ships carried. Still, there was no telling how easy it would be to force their way aboard the Erath flagship and land, especially now that battle with the Chiss had been fully joined. The dark vessel, as massive as Davek's *Makati*, was in the middle of the raider horde as it threw itself into battle against the CEDF line. The only relief was that the raiders seemed so concentrating on battling the Chiss that most didn't even notice the twenty-four Jedi TIE fighters slicing through their forces, destroying ships that got in their way or shot first but otherwise ignoring smaller ships for the big one lying ahead.

Marasiah checked her scanners. Of course the shields were up. The Jedi ducked beneath the belly of the flagship and hugged close to the defensive field. No other fighters or gunships tried to bother them but the flagships started to turn its belly cannons to fire. Most of heavy guns were more suited for slugging with capital ships than nailing snubfighters but Marasiah felt a flare of anguish wash through the Jedi's battle-meld and knew one of their pilots had died.

"All fighters, follow my lead," Arlen called. "I've spotted a medium-sized hangar, looks like it's got open space. We've got to bust open their shields."

Marasiah swung around until she spotted Arlen; he already had nine other fighters tucked in formation behind him and he began his battle-run, pumping laserblasts and torpedoes into the defensive screen over the shield generators in hopes of smashing them open.

She tried to keep her frustration from spilling into the battle meld. Arlen was letting his emotions get to him; he was too frantic, too obsessed with getting to Abeloth as quickly as possible without fully evaluating the field of battle or communicating his plan to his soldiers. He was probably going to get more Jedi killed that way.

But as the most senior knight in the group and son of the great Jaina Solo Fel, there was nothing Marasiah could do to countermand him. Checking once more to make sure everything was transmitting back to *Makati*, she joined the formation loaned her own attacks to the shield generators.

Like any well-designed capital ship, the Erath vessel had been prepared for these attacks. Gun turrets around the hangar mouth designed to track smaller fighters did their job, picking off two more Jedi and vaporizing them. The loss of three of their own pumped angry determination into the battle meld and they kept attacking. In the end it simply came down to attrition. The shield over the hangar could only take so much, and a pair of torpedoes from Katrin Mull's fighter finally slipped through, detonated, and brought down the defensive screen.

"Excellent work!" Marasiah called "Knight Squadron, with me. We'll clear away the defensive turrets. Saber Squad-"

"We're getting ready to land," Arlen said. "All pilots, prepare for fast evac and combat. Try to clear the deck with your cannons first."

And hope they didn't blow up the whole hangar before they landed, thought Marasiah. Her pilots moved swiftly, picking off targets of opportunity and destroying one turret gun after another until the entire hull section around the hangar mouth was cleared. By then Arlen was already taking his ten surviving fighters in. Only two fighters were spraying low-energy blasts from their canons to

clear the deck, which meant there must not have been that much resistance. Marasiah pulled her fighter around to get a better look inside and saw the hangar, while empty, had less usable space than she'd expected; certainly not enough for twenty TIEs.

She flicked her comm to Arlen's private channel and said, "There's not room for all of us."

"I know. I'll take the Sabers in. I think I we can fit maybe two more—"

"I'll give you two and take the rest of the Knights back out."

"Are you looking for another hangar?"

"I'd rather help the Chiss and keep the feed to Davek going."

"Good plan."

As she watched, his Saber extended its landing struts and set down unopposed on the flight deck. The others TIEs began to do the same. She said, "Don't get yourself killed, dammit."

He actually laughed. "I'll try not to. And same to you."

Another channel chimed for attention and she switched over. Katrin Mull, frantic, said, "One Vagaari gunship heading straight for us, Lead."

"Understood." She switched to the broadest comm channel. "Knights Eleven and Twelve, you're clear to land. Everyone else, with me. We're staying in this fight a while longer."

As she spun her TIE around, spotted the approaching gunship and kicked her engines ahead to meet it, she actually felt grateful and guilty at the same time. She'd been flying TIEs for over half her life; even the chaos of this battle didn't really scare her.

Abeloth, though, was *terrifying*. She was glad not to be facing it and dreaded the thought of telling Davek she'd let his brother die fighting it alone.

The Erath vessel, gigantic and unfamiliar to any of them, should have felt like an endless maze, but Allana knew instinctively which way to go. It was as helpful as it was terrifying; she hadn't been able to sense Abeloth outside the ship but now she could feel the cold and aching need that Luke and Ben had described to her, wiggling

like a tentacle in the back of her mind, reeling her in closer and closer.

Perhaps because Abeloth knew she was aboard, they faced only sporadic bouts of resistance, as though the Force entity was testing them. Clusters of black-armored soldiers appeared in the hallways and opened fire, and again and again the Jedi were forced to fight them. The soldiers were relentless; even when the Jedi destroyed their rifles or broke bones to stop them without killing they kept on attacking with bladed weapons or even their boots and fists. All too often the only way to stop them was to kill, and grim brutality of it quickly wore each Jedi down.

After the third or fourth such encounter Allana bent low and pulled the helmet off a dead soldier's face. As she'd expected, she looked into the lifeless multi-faceted eyes and rainbow-colored skin of an Erath. The others they unmasked were the same. These were the soldiers who'd stayed loyal to Abeloth when the rest of their planet did not. She wondered if it was because of their own fanaticism or Abeloth's Force-power mind control. In the end it didn't matter. All they could do was press on.

Everything changed when they entered what looked to be a mess hall. Broad and open like none of the other places they'd found, a series of tables had been thrown up on their sides as barricades. Dozens of black-masked Erath soldiers crouched behind them rifles resting atop the table-sides and aimed at the Jedi. The six of them raised their sabers to deflect but not shots came. They didn't step forward either; the goal was clearly to constrain them but not to fight.

The two groups stood facing off for an agonizingly long moment; Jodram, flexing his two-handed grip on his saber, whispered, "What should we do? Charge them?"

Qel glanced at Allana. "Does our path lie ahead, Jedi Djo?"

It did. She could feel Abeloth's presence drawing her forward. That it was only reaching out to *her* was the most terrifying part. Perhaps it was because she had Anakin Skywalker's blood in her; perhaps it was because of the vision Luke and her father had seen of

her in the Maw. Either way the creature seemed intent to take her, body and soul.

The sound of another saber igniting turned their attention back to the enemy line. They saw the bobbing blue-white of a blade held high, then the pale face and long hair of Sothais Saar. He stood tall behind the crouched Erath soldiers and stared at the Jedi across the chamber.

"Master Saar, how *could* you?" Qemar bleated. Master Qel and Allana had already explained to everyone the true nature of what they were fighting and what she'd done to Sothais Saar, but they were still struggling to wrap their minds around it.

"That's not Master Saar," Allana whispered.

"Are you sure?" asked Jodram, voice shaking. "Maybe he's still possessed, not—"

Saar jumped nimbly over the barricade and stepped to the center of the room before stopping. He held his arms wide and smiled; as Allana looked at that chalky face the grin seemed to grow wider, and the darkness in his eyes deeper, until there was nothing beneath his brows but total blackness and the faint gleam of a starlight where pupils should have been.

Fear shot through her, freezing her in place. After all these years she was finally face-to-face with Abeloth.

"You've come this far, Jedi Queen," Saar's voice boomed through the room. "Come a little closer."

Allana found her voice. "Never."

"I'll spare the rest of them if you do."

She didn't believe that for a second. "No."

The mad smile wilted; Saar shook his head with what seemed to be remorse. "That's your choice, then."

Then it all happened at once. Saar threw himself at the Jedi and the soldiers behind him sprayed laserfire, filling the chamber. It was too much for six Jedi to deflect all at once. Hot blasted winged Allana's arms and side as she struggled to block Saar's pounding saber-attacks. Qemar, Rollra, and Jodram threw themselves at the barricades. Jodram and Qel tried to come in behind Saar- Abeloth- and take the creature three-on-one but Abeloth danced away. With

a pulse of Force energy, she threw Jodram and Qel hard against the back wall and drew Allana forward. She struggled to pull back, but her feet scraped across the deck and an unbearable pressure forced her on her knees until she was prostrate before Abeloth. She looked up into the old Chev's face to find it grinning again, and stars blazing bright in the blackness of its eyes.

She thrust her lightsaber upward, straight into Saar's stomach. Abeloth didn't even flinch. She reached out with both hands to grasp Allana's head but the Jedi struck out again, wildly flailing her saber in fans of light that sheared off both of Saar's arms at the elbow. They dropped to the floor and Abeloth looked at the scorched stumps like they were an unexpected but mild inconvenience.

Allana watched as tentacles seemed to resolve out of thin air, ghost-like wisps of form that emerged from Saar's smoking elbows and stretched out longer and longer until they writhed in front of her face.

Then something slammed into Saar's body, throwing it back against a wall. An explosion followed the second later; another invisible hand grabbed Allana and pulled her back across the deck until she slammed into the same wall Jodram and Qel now slumped against.

Her ears rang from the concussive shock but she watched as a dozen more Jedi charged into the fray, sabers bobbing blue and green and gold and white. Most of them joined the ones already fighting at the barricades but Arlen Fel crouched down beside her and placed a hand on her forehead.

She saw him mouth the words *are you alright?* and barely, faintly heard them.

"I'm okay," she said and tried to stand. Arlen helped her rise on shaking feet; Jodram and Qel helped her too. The grenade's explosion had filled the room with smoke but she saw lightsabers slicing through the haze and a fast-decreasing number of laser-blasts. In less than a minute it was finally still.

Someone used the Force to funnel the smoke down into a hallway, clearing the space so they could see it fully. Sothais Saar's

body, blackened and battered, lay limp but intact on one side of the room, surrounded by a dark impact crater that had dented a portion of the floor and wall. The barricades had been toppled and the soldiers were all dead. Allana's heart plunged to see two human bodies belonging to Imperial knights she didn't recognize. When she saw the great form of a Wookiee slumped against a wall with a dozen blaster marks still smoking from her pelt, it absolutely plunged.

"Oh, Rollra," Allana staggered across the room. Valiss, crouched next to her, shook her head. Losing his daughter at such a young age would be horrible for Lowbacca. Even now the Grand Master was probably feeling that loss through the Force, as was Rollra's.

Qel gripped her shoulder hard. "We have to keep moving. Can you still feel Abeloth?"

Allana pushed away her grief and let the Force flow through her. She felt that same tentacle of need touching her, beckoning her to come through the doorway and deeper into the ship.

"Abeloth has at least one more body on this ship. It has to be this Storm King."

"Not the queen the Erath mentioned?"

"I don't know. But we have to destroy her Erath bodies if we want to stop this war."

"Then we need to keep going." Arlen looked down on Rollra's body with grim determination. "All of us."

As soon as he said it there was a scraping sound from the far side of the chamber. The remaining Jedi looked in shock as Sothais Saar's body, still lying in the center of the blast crater, began to retch. Limbs broken at the joints flailed unnaturally and the body suddenly snapped at the hips and sat upright. Long white locks of hair draped across the Chev face as it twisted on a canted, broken neck. Dark eyes gleamed through the curtain and fixed on the Jedi.

Yet for all Abeloth's power, this body had been badly weakened. With limbs and bones shattered it struggled to stand up. Master Qel turned to Allana and snapped, "Keep going! Jedi Fel, keep her safe! We'll hold her back!"

Allana started, "You can't-"

"He's right." Arlen grabbed her by the shoulder. "Come on, we have to keep moving. If there's only two bodies we can split up."

"But—"

One of Arlen's Imperial knights dropped to one knee, pulled a military-grade blaster pistol off his belt, and began shooting. Blast after blast cut through Saar's torso, sending tremors through the body without felling it.

"Allana, go," Jodram said and switched on his saber. "We'll finish it off. You have to get the other body."

He was right; they all were. As a few more Jedi moved to surround Saar's body, the rest started through the opened door. Allana joined them, and together they plunged deeper into the ship.

When the *Afsheen Makati* exited hyperspace it had three dozen capital ships from the Fourth Fleet along with it, ranging from gunships and frigates to massive *Compellor*-class destroyers and *Impellor*-class carriers. It was what they'd been able to scramble in time for a fast attack; they'd had to leave a third of the fleet behind at Ord Thoden. From the bridge Davek looked down the *Makati*'s eight-kilometer-long hull and saw Captain Korak's *Nightwatch* gushing out a stream of TIE fighters and bombers, hundreds of them, all rushing to join the chaos over this black unnamed world.

Marasiah and his aunt had both been feeding them a live-stream of data from the battle. He knew that Arlen's Jedi strike team had boarded the Erath vessel that now sat large and visible in the heart of the maelstrom. The Chiss had endured frenzied attacks by the raiders with the best aplomb they could manage. On the tactical holo he marked his aunt's flagship sitting at the rear of an encircling line that had pinned most of the enemy into the small world's gravity well. They already looked to have dealt great damage and received their own share in turn. His sensors marked the burn-out and dead hulls of four Chiss star destroyers and a dozen more support ships. The battle didn't seem to have reached his aunt's ship yet, thankfully, but neither had the Erath taken visible damage. He only hoped the Jedi could decapitate it from the inside.

As the Fourth Fleet deployed the raiders scrambled to respond, more slowly than Davek had anticipated. That gave the initial TIEs and fast-moving gunships a chance to pound the enemy and soften their forward lines for the advancing star destroyers. Davek should have been encouraged by it, but a glance at the tactical readout sobered him. Right now the Fourth Fleet and the Chiss combined to have roughly the same number of active capital ships as the raiders. The raiders, however, were in a defensive mode with their backs to the planet and, worse, would be making suicide attacks when they got desperate.

Davek hurried over to the comm station and asked, "Any word from Admiral Grave?"

"We just got a buzz from the Second, sir," the lieutenant told him. "They report they're about one hour inbound."

One hour. Everything could happen in one hour, especially in a fight bound to be savage. All they could do was fight and keep the raiders contained until then.

Davek was determined to do it. Here, at least, they had the bulk of the enemy fleet cornered, including the flagship. He still didn't know what was really going on behind all this- Arlen hadn't even tried to explain- but the ones responsible for the death of his father were here. He let that fact settle into him and knew what had to be done, *would* be done.

Jedi spoke ill of the desire for revenge. For once, Davek was thankful he was not a Jedi.

When the Sith faced opposition in the halls of the flagship they cut through it ruthlessly: Kheykid leading the charge with an animal flurry of blades and claws and thrashing tail, Darth Avanc with his graceful saber-thrusts, Terrid with his heavy blows left and right, Serissa in the back, shielded from stray laser-blasts by all their red blades but more than ready to fire past them with carefully-aimed rifle-shots that dropped one black-armored soldier after another. Any hesitation to kill was gone from her; part from the ritual killing of the Pal'shoran, but more for the adrenaline-fueled knowledge it was kill or be killed.

Prying several helmets off the dead defenders clarified some things. Like all Chiss schoolchildren, Ran'wharn'csapla had been told of the Erath warlord Nuso Esva, he of rainbow-colored skin, insectoid eyes, and hair like black storm-clouds. The controversial Mit'thraw'nuruodo had crushed the Erath war fleet almost a century ago and nothing had been heard of the race since. Clearly they lay at the heart of this, though in what way Terrid still didn't know.

Despite bouts of fierce fighting, Darth Terrid was surprised how little resistance they met. Before departing *Intruder* their sensors had lit up, reporting that a Chiss battle fleet was descending on the raiders, but so far no explosions had rocked this vessel. The Erath must have been distracted, but they should have still moved against intruders aboard.

They got their answer, first through the Force. All the Sith sensed it; even Serissa seemed touched by a niggling presence. They felt anger and frustration and desperation but also an inner peace beyond all the turmoil.

"Jedi," Darth Avanc said aloud. "They are in combat."

They let the Force guide them closer. They used their sabers to cleave through two decks and drop down until they were close. They felt it welling directly beneath them; the Jedi fighting and something else, a darkness that was powerful but restrained and unlike anything Terrid had ever felt before. The only thing it reminded him of was when he'd been taken to view Lord Krayt in stasis; hints of the unconscious Dark Lord's power had emanated from his body and promised an even greater wrath when he awoke.

Whatever was beneath them was like that: one part of an even greater dark power.

Darth Avanc dropped to one knee and plunged his saber into the deck. The others stood aside as he carved a circular hole in the floor big enough for even Darth Kheykid to slip through. Instead of letting the cut-through portion of the ship fall he lifted it up with the Force and let it rest in their corridor.

They all crowded close to see everything. The large room, perhaps a mess hall, was already filled with bodies and scorch-

marks from explosions. A group of Jedi danced and clashed through the smoldering ruin: a Weequay with a violet saber, a blue-green Nautolan female, a pale-haired human with a blue blade and two dark-haired ones wearing the white armor chest-plates common to Imperial Jedi.

In the center of them all, battling all five Jedi at once, was a male Chev with a blue saber in hand. *He* was the source of the darkness, though he was no Sith Terrid had ever seen. From the confusion on Avanc's face he was no One Sith at all. As Terrid looked closer he saw the Chev moved with an unnatural fluidity; joints bent back in ways they shouldn't and at one point his head swung too far and too natural for an unbroken neck. Yet still he kept fighting, as though the body itself were merely a battered puppet for something even greater.

As they watched the Weequay lunged in close enough to spear the Chev through the heart. The creature barely seemed to notice; with the flick of a wrist the blue saber cleaved straight through the Weequay's neck and the body tumbled dead on the floor. Terrid stared closer still and saw that the Chev *had* no hands, not even wrists. The arms looked to have been cleaved off just past the elbow and strange translucent tentacles, barely visible, writhed out from the gap to clutch the lightsaber's handle.

Dread and confusion mounted together as they watched the dead Weequay's saber flip up into the other set of tentacles. Wielding two sabers at once, the Chev sent himself into spin. The other Jedi tried to skip away but one Imperial was caught by a horizontal whirl that cut him neatly in half at the waist.

"It's *her*," Avanc gasped. When Terrid looked at his former master he saw the Keshiri's violet face had gone pale, his jaw slack. The veteran Sith, always so calm and assured, bled absolute horror into the Force like nothing Terrid had ever felt.

"What *is* it?" Terrid asked.

"That is no Jedi," Kheykid hissed.

The Chev kept spinning fast and without stopping. It would have been enough to scramble any other being's brains but it kept moving, lightning fast, and caught the other Imperial as he tried to

flee. The Jedi fell, minus one arm, and the Chev finally stopped spinning and raised up both blades to cleave the wounded knight in half.

That was when the other two- the blond human and the Nautolan- spun into action. With shocking bravery they fell on the Chev from behind; the Nautolan speared her saber through his back while the human took one brave horizontal swing through its neck.

The head toppled off its shoulders. The headless body stood there, wavering, half-arms at its sides, still clutching the sabers with two sets of ghostly tentacles.

Then, with a cry, Serissa opened fire. A half-dozen laser bolts lancing down from the ceiling and speared the Chev's body through the chest. It dropped the sabers and fell, but amazingly did not lay prone. The stumps of its arms caught its fall and it struggled to rise up from its knees.

"Darth Kheykid, with me," Avanc said, and dropped down through the hole. The Barabel followed right behind him, leaving Terrid and Serissa to watch.

They came out of nowhere: two dark figures falling to the deck and impacting so hard it sent shudders through the floor. A lightsaber sprung out from the smaller figure's hands, a blazing red. From the other, larger body two shorter blades appeared, jutting out from the wrists like elongated claws. A tail thrashed eagerly against the deck and at that moment Jodram was sure he was hallucinating. *All* of this should have been a hallucination: Sothais Saar's betrayal, Master Qel's death, this crazed headless body that *still* wouldn't lie down after the exhausting fight that had claimed half the Jedi who'd stayed to put it down.

And now, to top it all off, the Barabel Sith Lord he'd fought seventeen years ago appeared in front of him now. It *had* to be the same: the big creature's predatory grace, black-and-red face, and short dual sabers had haunted his memory all these years. It was the same Sith who'd cleaved off his left arm, the same Sith his friend Wharn had died to kill.

That Sith, and another, fell right on Abeloth's prone body. Three blood-red lightsabers hacked away at the bent torso; the remaining Jedi stood back in shock and awe and watched as what was left of Master Saar struggled to rise on its knees. It spread out its arms and tentacled pushed out. One took the smaller Sith- he looked like an older human with violet skin- and threw himself across the room. The Barabel savagely hacked with both sabers, cleaving a diagonal cut through the body from should to hip. The body fell in two pieces and the Barabel hacked at it again, cutting a straight vertical line until all that was left were smoking pieces, too chopped-up and scattered to move.

And then, like a great exhalation of breath, Jodram felt Abeloth's consciousness finally leave that body.

The Sith from his nightmares stood over Sothais Saar's remains and turned its slit-eyed reptilian gaze on the three Jedi. The Imperial knight was too wounded to stand but Jodram and Qemar put themselves between him and the Barabel and raised their sabers to defend.

The Barabel stayed where it was, watching them. The violet-skinned Sith rose to his feet and called his fallen saber to his hand.

"We should save one of them for questioning," the humanoid Sith said.

The Barabel tensed to leap; then the door through which Allana and Arlen had disappeared burst open and three more Imperial knights rushed in. Someone must have sensed Master Qel's death and sent backup. The humanoid Sith pivoted toward them but the Barabel kept facing Jodram and Qemar. Everyone froze; none of them willing to start the fight anew.

"We'll save this fight for another day," the violet Sith said. Then he and the Barabel leaped into the air and disappeared into the hole in the ceiling through which they'd come.

One of the Imperial rushed over to his fallen comrade. He asked, "What happened? Where did the Sith come from? And Abeloth-"

"That body's dead." Jodram waved his saber weakly as the pieces of Master Saar. "And the Sith just... *showed up*."

"We can't let them get away," the Imperial said.

He was right. If the Sith who'd engineered the crises in Senex-Juvex and Hapes, the Sith who'd killed Ben Skywalker, were involved, the Jedi couldn't let them escape without learning more. As confused and exhausted as they all were, this wasn't close to over.

Allana felt it when a piece of Abeloth died. From what Ben and Luke had said, the Force abomination could possess multiple bodies but in doing so it spread its power thinner, and when one body was killed Abeloth as a whole was wounded and would need to recover.

There was at least one more body aboard this ship, and now was the time to kill it. They'd advanced deeply into the ship when she felt the other body's death; close, she thought, to the command deck where Abeloth would be orchestrating the great space battle that raged around them. When Saar's body finally died the tentacle of need that had been dragging Allana forward suddenly withdrew. Maybe Abeloth was weak; maybe she was afraid and no longer wanted to risk capturing Allana while she had a dozen other Jedi fighting alongside her. No matter, what, it was all the more incentive to press on.

Explosions started rocking the ship and Allana knew that meant the battle had come to the Erath ship at last. She chose to take that as another sign of Abeloth's weakening but it also meant they might find themselves in danger from their own allies soon.

Now that Abeloth was no longer trying to lure them in she set to defend herself as well. It had been clear for a while that they were getting close to the bridge; now they were forced to cut through layers of lowered blast doors and fight off an increasing amount of armored Erath troopers. The soldiers themselves seemed weakened along with their master; their shots went wide more often and they reacted slowly when the Jedi broke through their defenses and began disarming them. Despite their weakened state they took down two more of Arlen's Imperial knights before the group reached a set of blast doors more thickly layered than anything they'd encountered yet. As the remaining eight Jedi began to hack

through the armored defenses with their sabers, Allana stood back from them all. She reached out with the Force, through the armored wall, and felt for Abeloth's presence. This time Allana was the one to touch *her*; she felt the same constant cold need but also fear of a wounded animal.

Whatever state she'd be in, Abeloth was on the other side, readying herself for them.

Arlen stepped back from the blast doors, letting Valiss and the Imperials finish the job. He asked, "Do you feel her?"

"Do *you*?"

Grimly, he nodded. "I'm not sure if the others do. I think it might be..."

"Skywalker blood?"

"I don't know. Anakin never actually *met* Abeloth, just the Ones she called her family."

"I remember the stories."

"I never really thought they were more than that."

"I remember the last time she showed up. I'm sorry you had to be here for this."

The hallway rocked hard around them; the battle must have been getting close. One of Arlen's knights looked back at them and called, "We're almost through!"

He looked at Allana. "Ready?"

"No." She switched her lightsaber on.

"Fair enough," breathed Arlen, and waved the knights back. They fell away blast doors that were now laced and fractured with dozens of deep saber-cuts. Allana had never mastered the Force ability known as Shatterpoint but here they'd done the next-best thing: carved the armored door into so many pieces all it would take was a little combined Force-effort to rip it apart.

The remaining Jedi stood back, sabers in one hand and the other arms outstretched. They linked minds and Allana let the shared bravery and determination wash over them, for the moment canceling out their shared dread of what lay on the other side.

Then, as one, nine minds pulled the blast door apart. Burnt metal screamed in protest as it ripped. Sheared-open gaps stretched wider as the carved pieces separated.

Then they shoved the armored chunks forward. They flew into the chamber beyond, fell thunderously onto the floor, skidded and scraped and threw up sparks, smashed into the bulkheads and crushed the Erath who'd gathered behind the doors to defend their master.

When the sparks and smoke cleared Allana took it all in: the bridge of the great flagship and the great broad transparisteel window that wrapped halfway around the command deck, giving a panoramic view of the constant laser-flash and explosions and swarms of darting ships that made up the chaotic battle of which this ship was the heart.

Standing in the center of the deck, surrounded by debris and smashed-down bodies but untouched by them, was a male Erath in a black martial uniform. His head was bowed but hair billowed up like black clouds. Arms hung at his sides and Force lightning crackled between his fingers. When the King of Storms lifted his head his multifaceted eyes gleamed like fields of stars.

The Jedi charged. Abeloth raised both hands and spent out a wash of Force-lightning but the Jedi were prepared to block. Most of the caught it with raised sabers; those who couldn't fell back, weakened. Arlen and Allana led the charge. Arlen was younger, stronger, faster; he threw himself forward, saber-first, not at Abeloth but above. As he somersaulted his blade dipped down, slicing through the Storm-king's shoulder and neatly severing one arm.

He never landed. An invisible Force wave pushed Arlen before boots could touch deck and threw him hard against the transparisteel. Before Allana could deliver another blow Abeloth lashed out with half-visible tentacles that had instantly sprung out from her sheared-off arm. They knocked Allana to the side as well; then Abeloth raised her other hands and blasted the remaining knights with another gust of Force energy. Allana saw Valiss crumple and fall under the blast, saw another Imperial knight rise

again and hurl his saber through the air. Its blazing pinwheel suddenly stopped and fell into the Storm-king's grasp. The knight, stunned and shocked at what he'd done, had no time to react. Abeloth sent out another gush of Force lighting that lit up his entire body, viciously charring him to the bone.

She knew Abeloth couldn't expend so much energy without dropping her guard. Fighting back the icy pain the tentacle had left in her body, she grabbed her saber and charged Abeloth from behind. The Storm-king pivoted to block her, too late. She shoved her blade into its stomach and shifted upward, burning through black uniform and flesh to where the heart would be on a human.

The attack had some effect. The Erath body shuddered in pain. Allana knew that wouldn't end it so she pulled out her blade and jumped back, anticipating a retaliatory blow. The one-armed lightsaber strike was so strong it knocked her own weapon out of her hand and sent it skidding across the debris-strewn deck. The next blow came from the tentacles; they smashed into her from the side, cracking her left arm and sending pain shooting through her whole body. She barely had the strength to scream; the Storm-king delivered another blow that cracked ribs and brought her to her knees.

Another lightsaber flew through the air. Abeloth, distracted by her prize, was too slow to block it as it spun and sliced across the Storm-king's waist, cutting through stomach and hip-bone before it whirled back around and flew to rest in Cenya Valiss' outstretched hand.

The Storm-king howled in agony. Another wave of Force energy picked up the remaining Jedi and threw them against the bulkheads. Allana was thrown onto her broken arm; the impact-pain was blinding and the next thing she knew she was on the ground at the base of a broad transparisteel pane; the great battle continued to flash around her. She rolled onto her good side and saw the rest: the Storm-king barely standing but still unbroken, held on his feet by Abeloth's unimaginable Force energy. The Jedi were scattered across the chamber, all so weak they could barely stay

upright. Abeloth surveyed the wreckage of the bridge until her eyes found Arlen Fel. She began to take staggering towards him.

Allan reached out with the Force; she felt Abeloth's intent, Arlen's fear, the panic from the other Jedi. And she felt awareness outside the bridge too, but not far away.

A mind touched hers: curious, concerned. Out there, in the battle, but close by.

She thought it might be Davek's wife.

As Abeloth drew close to Arlen he ignited his lightsaber, ready to defend himself to the death. Allana pushed herself upright, stifled down the pain shooting from her arm, and called, "Abeloth, wait!"

The Storm-king turned to look at her. In a deep voice that seemed to echo Abeloth said, "Yes, Jedi Queen?"

"You want me? Fine," she glared. "Take me. I don't care. Just let them go. You offered that before."

"That was before. This is now."

Arlen jabbed his saber at her. "Come any closer and we'll cut your karking legs off!"

Allana touched him in the Force, told him *stay calm*, and *trust me*. She fought down more pain and rose on trembling legs. "Take me. Let them go. Do you really need another body if you have me?"

The Storm-king's head tilted thoughtfully. "I do not trust you."

"Fine." Allana held up her saber for all to see, then lazily tossed it to Abeloth's feet. Battered, defenseless, barely strong enough to stand, she said, "Good enough?"

Without anyone touching it, her saber sparked and melted. Abeloth said, "That is a start."

Then an invisible hand picked Aren off the deck and hurled him across the bridge, toward the ruins of the door. He had enough awareness to call on the Force to soften his fall, but he still tumbled into the hallway and disappeared from view.

"Run if you want," Abeloth said. "You won't get far."

Allana felt the confusion and fear and anger from all the others and sent them calm. And she reached out, too, to touch Marasiah's mind and said *wait* and *do exactly as I tell you*.

"Go," Allana called, as strongly as she could. "It's me she wants. Go."

Valiss and the other Jedi who could walk picked themselves up and staggered for the hallway. Allana felt Arlen's mind and told him what to do.

Abeloth staggered toward Allana. After so much damage it was clear the Storm-king's body wouldn't last much longer; the lure of Allana's, Force-strong and with relatively minor damage, was too strong a lure for the battered Force entity.

Allana knew it. She cleared her mind, took a deep breath, and told Arlen, *now*.

As one, the remaining Jedi picked up the chunks of debris from the blast doors and threw them through the air. Abeloth didn't bother to duck; they flew right around her and smashed into the broad window-panes. The layered transparisteel was designed to withstand direct hits from turbolaser blasts, but with the Jedi's combined powers the armored shards gathered great enough force to smash a hole through the viewport.

Then, with a great howl, the atmosphere began to gush from the bridge and spill into space. Allana didn't resist; she felt the current of escaping air lift her body up and pull it toward the gap. As she saw the same current picked up the Storm-king's broken frame and hurl it toward the vacuum she allowed the tiny smile of relief.

Until it happened, Marasiah didn't know what to do. Her squadron of TIE Sabers had been flying tight circles around the Erath flagship's recessed bridge section. The tempest in the Force there had been unmistakable, but when a mind on that bridge had reached out to touch hers she hadn't recognized it or known what it wanted. Then another joined in, more familiar: Arlen's. They needed her to stay close and be ready, to *do* something, but she still had no idea what.

Then the bridge had burst open from the inside. Transparisteel shards and chunks of debris spilled into space. Marasiah brought her circling fighter to a shuddering halt and watched. Among the debris she watched a single body tumble out into the void. It blazed

with a dark Force energy and the instinctive knowledge of a Jedi told her it had to be destroyed.

With the aid of the Force and the natural reflexes of an ace pilot, Marasiah dropped her targeting reticule on that flailing body, locked on, and fired a single torpedo. It was a tiny target but it was close and moving on a straight trajectory. As the torp flew out Marasiah gave it a tiny nudge with the Force to ensure it flew true.

The proton torpedo burst, a brief flare of light and heat, then ashes and void.

The Jedi barely made it out in time. They'd destroyed the first set of blast doors to access the bridge; the second set, the one they'd pried open with the Force but left intact, was an eternal-seeming ten meters straight down the hall. The knights used the Force to help push themselves toward the doors even as the air started to gush out through the shattered bridge viewport. Arlen clung to the edge of the shattered blast doors and reached out with the Force to grab Allana. She was pulled hard and fast toward the vacuum and fell halfway out into the cold void before he could arrest her plunge. He reeled her in even as the escaping air threatened to pull them both into space, and when Allana was close enough to grab with his own hand he felt the Jedi behind him grab them *both*, reeling them to safe down the hall with their combined strength.

When they landed hard on the deck and the door hissed shut in front of them, sealing them off from the breach, Arlen immediately rolled over to face Allana. The woman lay on her back, eyes closed; he reached out to touch her face it stung with cold from the vacuum. He moved his fingers to her neck and felt a pulse; he tried to touch her with the Force and got a fluttering of the eyes and the creaking open of a mouth.

She tried to speak but all that escaped was a rasp. Arlen bent over her, pressed his forehead to hers, and let a rattling, relieved laugh escape.

"It's okay," he whispered, "We did it. Can't you feel it? She's gone."

All of a sudden, everything about the battle changed. Caught between the tightening arms of the Chiss and the Imperial Second Fleet, the raiders had been striking out with increased ferocity. More and more ships were reducing themselves to living missiles, hurling themselves at the closest capital ship and smashing through hull and shields. Davek had lost three full star destroyers when a Tylonian frigate broke through the *Makati's* defensive screen and smashed into the hull at full speed. The impact had been far down toward the bow, five or six full kilometers away from the bridge, but the resulting explosion had torn through the hull and send powerful shudders through the length of the great star destroyer. That damage had brought all their forward shields to a breaking point and Davek had been forced to halt their drive toward the Erath flagship still in the heart of a storm that was getting increasingly contracted and intense.

Then something happened. The ships that had been suicidally hurling themselves at Davek's fleet broke into evasive maneuvers. They kept firing on their Chiss and Imperial opponents but their strategy had suddenly and thinkably changed. He couldn't believe it until the first cluster of Pal'shoran ships slipped through the Chiss part of the blockade and jumped to hyperspace.

They were all trying to *run*.

He was still trying to wrap his mind around that when Tactical reported the arrival of the Second Fleet. A glance at the tactical holo showed as many new ships inbound as there were fighting the raiders already. Admiral Grave and his men would want their piece of the fight. As far as Davek was concerned they were welcome to it.

"Admiral," the comm officer called, "We're being hailed. It's the *Teshik*. Admiral Grave requests instructions."

"Tell him the enemy's trying to slip away. Don't let them."

"Yes, sir." After a second the lieutenant added, "Sir, we've got another hail. It's from Knight One. She's requesting to speak with you personally."

Somehow, for all the ferocity out there, had hadn't doubted that Marasiah would still be flying. She might even know what the hells

was going on. Davek came over to the comm station and said, "Put her on."

"*Makati*, do you read?" His wife's voice, static-marred as it was, had an instantly calming effect.

"We read you," he said. "What's happening out there?"

"We took her out. That's why they're all trying to run."

"Took *who* out? Is Arlen alright?"

Her sigh crackled over the speaker. "Arlen's fine. So's Allana. We lost a lot of Jedi, Davek, but she's dead. I think."

"Who? This, ah, Queen of Night?"

"I think it was the King of Storms, actually. I can't explain it all now, but we cut off the head and they're running. A bunch of shuttles are leaving the Erath ship now. They're *all* jumping ship."

"The Second Fleet just arrived. Well contain them the best we can—"

"You'll destroy them, you mean."

"Marasiah—"

"Do what you have to. I'm going to see what I can do for our Jedi."

The comm line closed and Davek was left fumbling with more questions than answers. He had a feeling not even Marasiah really understood what had just happened. He hoped his brother and Allana would be able to fill them in, because right now nothing felt like a victory.

He turned away from the comm station and looked out the viewport. In the far distance Grave's fleet, unbattered and ready to fight, smashed into the enemy and mercilessly turned their frantic fleet a field of explosions hundreds of kilometers wide.

No, it didn't feel like victory at all.

The Sith almost got back to their ship before Darth Avanc called an abrupt change of plans. They'd latched *Intruder* to an airlock portal located near one of the auxiliary hangars and were caught in rush of Erath trying to get to the shuttles docked there. The soldiers who'd once fought and died to keep them from advancing barely paid

notice to them now. All they seemed to care about was getting off this ship.

Darth Terrid still had no idea what was going on; what the enemy they'd seen in the mess hall was or why Avanc was desperate to get back to *Intruder* when there were still Jedi boarding parties coming after them. Only four Jedi were in pursuit, by his count, and they were all haggard and exhausted from their fight in the mess hall. Darth Kheykid alone probably could have handled them but for Avanc the priority was getting *away* from easy prey.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't. After being pushed aside by another rush of Erath, Avanc grabbed Terrid by the front of his tunic and pulled him into a side hall. Serissa and Kheykid joined them, ducking out of the flow.

"Something's changed," Avanc said.

"I can see that." Terrid jerked himself free. "What happened? What *was* that thing?"

Avanc breathed deep, let it out. "I can't explain right now. But we need to know where they're all fleeing to."

"What? Why?"

"Because this isn't over yet. Our enemy isn't dead yet."

"The thing in the mess-"

"Was one body. The Jedi must have killed another but it has more out there. Darth Terrid, go board one of their shuttles before they all get away. These are her servants. If anyone's running back to her it will be them."

Something in what he said was stirring long-buried memories, of what Terrid couldn't pin down. "You mean hijack a ship?"

"I mean stow away. Lay low. Let it take you to your destination, or until you *know* the destination. Then kill the crew and hail *Intruder*." He saw Terrid's gaze tilt toward Serissa. "Take your apprentice. It should be an easy task. From the looks of them now they won't put up much of a fight."

Whatever Avanc knew he wasn't going to explain until his orders were carried out. Terrid had no idea what this threat they were facing really was but apparently Avanc did, which meant he

had no choice but to bow to the older Sith Lord's demands and hope he knew what he was doing.

"What about the Jedi behind us?"

"Darth Kheykid and will take care of them. *Go.*"

He looked at Serissa and saw the confusion and reluctance on her face. He felt the same, which meant they'd at least be in the same mess. "Let's go," he rasped, and turned back toward the trickle of Erath now hurrying down the halls to their hangar. Serissa followed without a word.

Even when they got to the hangar no one seemed to pay much attention, but Terrid insisted on stepping back behind the cover of some emptied supply crates to scout the situation. Three Erath shuttles remains, each one a with a dark low-domed body like the back of an insect. Only a few more soldiers were left to straggle in; the shuttle nearest to them was already firing its main thrust engines and raising its landing ramp, which meant they had only two options left.

He looked at them both and noticed one seemed to have a second cargo hatch still hanging wide. It was the perfect opening; he jabbed a finger at it and Serissa nodded. The shuttle closest to them roared to life, kicked up on its repulsors, and pushed out toward the hangar mouth. With the blaster rifle cradled in both arms she and Terrid both stepped into the open and prepared to run for it.

That was when the Jedi arrived.

When Jodram and Qemar broke onto the maintenance catwalks strung above the hangar space, it hadn't taken them long to spot the two dark-clothed figures crouched behind the supply crates in the corner of the flight deck. They'd had to rely on the Force as they'd given chase to the Sith, and when they'd sensed the dark, intent presences of the Dark Side users split into two groups the Imperial knights had chosen one path, Jodram and Qemar the other. Why they all weren't heading back to the same ship he didn't know, but maybe he could find out later.

There was no denying how scared he was. He'd fought Sith once before and nearly died. He'd been an apprentice then, half-trained and overconfident, but that was no guarantee he'd fare better today. He was thankful, at least, that the Barabel was nowhere in sight.

When the shuttle directly beneath them rose and lurched for the exit, the Sith started moving too. He and Qemar moved as one, leaping over the catwalk railing and igniting their lightsabers as they fell, Force-slowed to soften the impact. The heat from the shuttle's engines washed over them fast as they fell through it; then they dropped onto the deck right behind the Sith.

One of them, the male, ignited his lightsaber as he turned. The other, female and younger, spun on her heel and raised a blaster rifle. Jodram hefted his saber to block the first shot, then froze, stunned by the blue skin and glowing red eyes of the male Sith Lord. And in that same second, the Chiss seemed to freeze too.

Then a blaster bolt skimmed Jodram's upper arm; pain brought him back to his senses and he deflected the next shot back at the young woman. The Chiss raised his free hand and released a blast of Force lightning that Qemar caught on her lightsaber as she charged. The Chiss ducked beneath the Nautolan's horizontal saber-swipe, then released another burst of lightning directly into her stomach. Qemar let out a cry and lurched off-balance. The Chiss slipped one step back and swung his saber back for a killing blow.

Jodram was there to block him, using the Force to throw Qemar out of harm's way as he did. Blue and red sabers crackled against each other and their eyes met again through the sparks. Revelation begged but Jodram wouldn't, couldn't allow it. This was a battle to the death and another shock would kill him.

He sensed the girl's next laser-shot before it came and ducked out of the way. That was enough to knock him off-balance; the Chiss reached out and caught the collar of his shirt, and in the same moment released another burst of Force lightning that scalded Jodram's body and blinded him with blue-white.

The next thing he knew he was being pulled off his feet; then he slammed hard into metal and he found himself on his back, staring upward at two shadowed shapes as pain still twitched through his

body and a throbbing hum rose around him, like a starship warming its engines.

He heard something else, like a heavy latch sealing airtight, and then the dark cabin rattled more. He must have been thrown on one of the fleeing Erath shuttles, maybe in a cargo hold.

Jodram tried to rise but a boot slammed in his sternum and pinned him to the ground. He reached out and grabbed the booth with both hands, like he could pull it off his chest.

The man above him leaned close. Glowing red eyes settled just out of reach of his flailing hands. The whole cabin shuddered again and he knew this ship was taking off, flying free of the Erath flagship, taking him far away from the other Jedi and leaving him captive in the hands of a Sith.

But not just any Sith. A dim light flickered on, bringing clarity to the darkness. The young woman with the rifle stood to one side, uncertain. The Chiss leaned over Jodram still, looking at him closely. With reluctance, knowing what he'd find, Jodram let himself examine the blue face above his. All the youthful softness he'd remembered had been carved away by time and terrors he couldn't imagine, but he knew that face, just as the Sith knew his.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The battle at the planet Arlen eventually learned the Chiss called Sevok-358 was so large and chaotic that it took several days to tally the results. There was no hope for an accurate count of how many raiders had killed or how many of their ships destroyed versus escaped, but the estimate presented by the Chiss asserted that around fifty percent of the vessels they'd found at Sevok-358 during their initial ambush had been reduced to a chain of scorched debris that drifted in the planet's orbit like a gnarled halo.

As for the Imperial and Chiss losses, those could be determined with more clarity. Being the first to attack the Chiss has suffered the most damage, with a casualty rate of around thirty percent of total troops. For Davek's Fourth Fleet the rate sat at around twenty-five percent, hardly much better. Admiral Grave's Second Fleet got out of it practically unscathed with losses below five percent.

Those were proportions. When the raw death tolls were calculated and the status of the critically injured added in, the number of soldiers lost at Sevok-358 amounted to a quarter-million Chiss and roughly the same amount of Imperials, mostly from the Fourth Fleet.

It was a difficult toll to wrap a mind around. For Arlen the worst troubles were the most immediate. More than half of the Imperial Jedi he'd brought with him for the fight were dead. Allana Solo Djo was badly injured from the fight with Abeloth and exposure to the vacuum but at least she was set for recovery. Grand Master Lowbacca's daughter was dead, as were two veteran Jedi Masters. The worst was that it clearly wasn't over. Abeloth was still out there, presumably holding the body of the Erath's so-called Queen of Night; possibly she was in possession of even more. From what Arlen recalled about her, she may have absorbed key information about the Jedi Order from Master Saar's mind. Whether she could rally the scattered raiders for more attacks was unknown. It was uncertainty layered on uncertainty.

It was not something he looked forward to explain to his brother, and it was a mild relief when cleanup from the battle occupied Davek for almost two full days at Sevok-358 before the battered *Afsheen Makati* began the slow and careful lightspeed trip back to the Bilbringi shipyards, where it and a large chunk of the Fourth were due for badly needed repairs. Once the fallback to Imperial space began they finally had the time to discuss it. Marasiah joined them, and for a long time Davek simply sat on the sofa in his admiral's cabin, listened to the two Jedi as they explained what Abeloth was, the threat she represented, and the damage she'd already done.

When they finished Davek looked down at his folded hands and took a long minute to gather his thoughts. Finally he looked at his brother and said, "I understand why you didn't want to explain all this before. Frankly, I wouldn't have believed you."

"I hardly believed it either, but she was there," said Marasiah.

"You killed her. It took a proton torpedo to do it, but you did."

"She has bodies to spare," said Arlen. "The question is what she can do with the body or bodies she has left."

"You just said you don't know the answer."

"Nobody does. That's something the Jedi are going to have to find out next."

"Which Jedi?" Davek's eyes narrowed. "Our Jedi, the Imperial knights, or the ones from Ossus?"

"It's the same Order."

"You know it's not."

"I'm sorry, Davek, but in the eyes of the Jedi there's nothing special about knights from Imperial Space, just like there's nothing special about knights on other academies."

"Our government doesn't see it that way. Arlen, your knights are allowed to operate with my fleet because I asked you to. Me, personally. Grave or any of the other fleet admirals wouldn't, not even because they're anti-Jedi. They don't want to work with soldiers who don't follow orders."

"Are you asking for an apology for running off? You just agreed I couldn't have explained about Abeloth. We needed to move fast to stop her and we did."

Davek sighed. His eyes slipped to his wife and back to his brother. "You told me about how Allana's team investigated the Erath homeworld. What about *other* Jedi teams? How did they find Sevok-358?"

This was the part he'd been dreading, and he'd been stupid to think his brother would overlook it or just let it go. He'd wondered whether to lie when this question came up; wondered whether it might be better for his relationship with Davek. It was an option that would only offer brief escape and lingering guilt; still, he was tempted to lie.

When he hesitated to answer Davek looked at his wife. "Marasiah?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

"There's no reason she would," Arlen sighed. "The Jedi search teams were guided by the information from the Kaleesh warship Imperial Intelligence retrieved."

Stony, cold, Davek asked, "How did the Jedi get a copy?"

"It was my decision," Arlen said, deciding to leave their mother out of it.

"Did a Jedi *steal* it?"

"No. No Jedi was involved with the theft."

"Then who did?" Davek pressed.

Arlen sighed. "I enlisted the help of Tamar Skirata."

Davek looked like he was on verge of bursting. "I'm sorry, are you telling me you hired your ex-wife to commit *treason* for you?"

"It wasn't treason. And I didn't hire her. She did it to honor Dad."

Mention of their father seemed to soften his anger. "Arlen, the other admirals are going to ask how the Jedi found Savek-358. Avaris is going to ask. What do you expect me to tell them? Do you want me to *lie* to protect the Jedi?"

"What's the lie about? This all worked out in the end, Davek, for everyone. The raiders are crippled. Odds are good they won't attack again, at least not for a while. This was a victory."

"Then why doesn't it feel like one?"

Arlen looked away. He was right; it felt like no victory at all. There was too much uncertainty, out in uncharted space and in his own family. He didn't know what was coming next for either.

Davek heaved another sigh and pushed off from his sofa. "I need to think about this. I need to figure out what I'm going to tell them. But Arlen... I don't think we'll need your services right now."

"What does that mean? Me, personally, or all the Jedi in the Empire?"

"Arlen, take your people. Go back to Bastion so they can rest after all this. Look in on your *daughter*."

It made him feel guilty, but in all that had happened he'd almost forgotten about Marin and the Bastion riots. "Okay. I'll do that. I'll look in on Vitor and Roan too."

"Thank you," Davek said, but didn't meet his eyes.

"What about me?" asked Marasiah.

Davek looked at his wife cautiously. "What do you *want* to do?"

"I'd like to stay with you. And I'd like to keep some of Knight Squadron."

"All right. Go ahead. You two can decide among yourselves which Jedi go or stay."

"But *I'm* going back to Bastion," said Arlen, a statement with a touch of question.

"You can go to Ossus too, or wherever you want. Just... Take some leave, Arlen."

After what he'd done with Tamar's help, Davek would be in his rights to come down harder. Arlen supposed he should be grateful, but all he felt was that the lingering distrust between them had grown thicker.

"All right," he said. "Give me until we reach Bastion to decide everything. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go down and look in on our wounded."

He didn't offer Marasiah the chance to walk with him, to talk about Davek or the Imperial Jedi or anything else. Compelled by the urge to get out of that room he spun on his heel, marched out the door, and did not look back.

At long last, the air of tension that had stretched the Bilbringi crew to point of breaking relaxed. Word of the big battle in the Unknown Regions came down and as far as Lukas Briggs was concerned it was cause to celebrate. The raider fleet had been ambushed and smashed at their secret redoubt with the help of the Chiss. Their leader had apparently been killed, and some rumors said it was Admiral Fel's wife who'd done it- a Jedi knight and a Voidwalker to boot. Lukas hadn't seen Marasiah Valtor in over fifteen years but he still remembered the frigate's CAG as a small dark-haired woman with a stern demeanor and an iron will.

The news wasn't all good, but even the rest gave the Bilbringi crew a sense of purpose. The Fourth Fleet had taken a lot of damage during the battle and was lurching back to the shipyards in dire need of repairs. They were set to start arriving within twenty-four standard hours, and when they did the entire shipyard staff would be set to work. From the reports that had filtered down to Lukas' desk it would take over a month of full-staff overtime labor before the Fourth was close to fighting shape.

Because the news was, overall, good news, and because soon they'd all be working their butts off for one month straight, all the varied watering holes in the Bilbringi 'yards that night were packed to bursting with techs, administrators, and officers getting on one

last hurrah. That night Lukas met Colonel Malkin at the Rimwalker and they enjoyed several rounds of ale and a few messy games of darts with some of Lukas' friends from the quartermaster's office. At one point, after it had gotten late and a few of the staff officers had retreated to their families, Malkin slung a heavy arm over Lukas' neck and tugged him to a relatively private corner of the bar.

"You doing okay, Sarge?" asked Lukas as Malkin's heavy body leaned against his.

"I'm hanging in there, Private. Just fine, thanks." His bushy face was close and the ale was strong on his breath.

"It's good though, Sarge. We're through the mess, aren't we? Smashed the invaders. Settled the score." He smiled with relief but Malkin didn't return it.

"Oh, Briggs," the older man said, "We're just getting bloody started. You know that, right?"

"Well, sure, we'll have to work our butts off getting the Fourth back to fighting shape, but still—"

"No, no, that ain't it."

Malkin's squeeze on his neck tightened and Lukas tapped his tricep. "Okay, okay, just loosen up a little. It's all good, Sarge. Really, it's all good."

Malkin loosed the hold but didn't pull his arm away. With his free hand he wiped a bit of spilled ale out of his beard. "You've been a great help so far, Briggs. Just like I knew you would."

From the hush in his voice Lukas figured he was talking about the extra supplies he'd let slip onto the base along with the fresh troops from Yaga Minor. After the whole thing was said and done he found he hadn't felt guilty at all, not when he'd done what he'd done in order to protect civilians at the 'yards, civilians like his family.

"No problem, Sarge, really." He patted Malkin's arm again. "It's a good thing we didn't have to use that stuff, you know?"

Malkin exhaled; his knees weakened a little and his weight pressed down on Lukas a little more.

"Sarge, is something wrong?"

The older man breathed deep, straightened, and finally pulled his arm off Lukas' neck. "Not a damn thing. Want another round?"

"Um, are you sure that's a good idea?" Lukas felt okay but Malkin looked like he'd had too much already.

"Of course it's a kriffing good idea. Come on, just one more round, my treat."

It was longstanding policy in the stormtrooper corps to never turn down a free drink, especially when someone ranked above you offered to pay. "Okay then. If you inside. But one more round."

He followed Malkin back to the bar, and they got their drinks, and to his slight surprise it indeed ended up being the last round. When he got back to the habitat wing the children were asleep but Marian was still up; for once she was forgiving of his tardiness. As they lay down to sleep it occurred to him that he never did find out what had bothered Malkin; the man hadn't hinted anything else about it during their last shared drink. Lukas decided it couldn't have been that important, and with that thought allowed himself to drift away into sweet and simple rest.

It was a truism among the One Sith that all who did not draw power from the Force were vermin. This attitude was consistently drilled into all those raised Sith; for Darth Kroan, who'd been seduced to the dark during adolescence, the attitude still came easily. As a member of a centuries-old Kuati aristocratic Kuhvult family he'd been raised with a similar flavor of fervent elitism.

The Sith had opened his eyes and he knew the truth of what they said; still, the born aristocrat in him knew that some non-Force-users were less vermin than others. In upbringing and sensibility he had much alike with Moff Corrien Veers, scion of a venerable Imperial line that proudly claimed to have served Lord Vader himself. Veers had noticed their shared sympathies, without knowing the full truth of them, and had been quite happy to forge a closer relationship with KDY's chairman.

It was a closeness they both tried to keep out of the public eye. It was for that reason that they met this time in secret; Veers had found some excuse to get away from Yaga Minor for a few days and

Kroan, after a few weeks busy with KDY business, had claimed executive privilege and taken his personal yacht- itself the size of an Imperial frigate but far more elegant- out to the Mid Rom for an ostensible pleasure cruise.

Darth Kroan had personal staff who'd keep secrets; none would ever speak of Veers' shuttle slipping into the yacht's docking bay, nor of the sumptuous dinner prepared for just the two of them. Once the staff and servant droids delivered everything on the table they followed orders and left the two men alone.

Even among trusted staff there were things they couldn't say aloud, and it was a relief to have full privacy. After swallowing his first mouthful of a spiced nerf steak, Kroan said, "I trust the datacard I provided was helpful?"

"Oh yes," Veers nodded. "I've had agents patch your executive command codes into two dozen star destroyers in the First, Second, and Third Fleets."

"But not the Fourth?"

Veers smiled ruefully. "Admiral Fel is sharp, and busy besides. Now that half his fleet's undergoing repairs at Bilbringi, I might try and make some modifications. But that depends on *your* timetable."

Kroan smiled politely and took a sip of wine. It was a curious dance the two of them played; they shared the same goal of removing Neela Avaris and installing Veers himself as head of the Empire, but they had separate machinery working toward that goal, segregated and mostly secret from each other. Kroan had insisted on it; better to insulate him and the One Sith's operations from the Jedi when they inevitably started snooping around Veers. He'd given the moff some important tips, namely arranging for him to work with the Mandalorians. Veers hadn't specified exactly what he'd wanted Gevern Auch's commandos for at the time, but it was easy to guess that he'd enlisted them for a false-flag attack on the Chiss Ascendancy.

They weren't going to say it aloud even now- such were the careful rules of their game- but Kroan said, very politely, "I understand the Chiss were the ones who started the attack on the raider base. They must have taken heavy losses."

"That's true. They did." Veers moved smoothly past his last comment being ignored.

"I heard the Fourth Fleet was also badly damaged."

"Yes, and it would have been twice as bad if the Chiss hadn't been there to absorb the blows."

"I see." He bit off another bit of steak, chewed, and swallowed. "Tell me, what about the Second?"

"Admiral Grave's fallen back to Yaga Minor and started overseeing repairs."

"Minor ones, relatively?"

"They got off barely-scathed," Veers nodded firmly. He didn't say whether Admiral Grave's late arrival had been planned in advance. Kroan knew Veers had invested a lot of trust in the young admiral, though he insisted he'd shared nothing with Grave about his relationship with the Kuati.

"Well, that's fortunate for him. And you." Kroan sipped more wine. "You'll get an official announcement tomorrow, but I'm pleased to say that all work on *Invincible* has been completed. Your great new star destroyer will be on its way to Imperial space very soon. I'd plan on it arriving in, say, five standard days."

"Excellent," Veers grinned. He'd lobbied harder than any Imperial moff or admiral to build a new, state-of-the-art super star destroyer. There'd been no immediate threat four years ago, which had made his hawkishness all the more appealing to the One Sith, who'd been looking for an ally in the Imperial hierarchy.

"Tell me," said Kroan, "You have the executive command codes for the ship, but what do Avaris and Darakon expect to do with it? Which of the four fleets will it be assigned to?"

"There's been a lot of argument among the military brass for that. My sources say they'll want to bring it to Bastion first for a public christening ceremony."

"That should help bring order to the capital," Kroan observed.

Veers nodded. "It will show everyone that the Empire is strong, like it used to be. After that, there's talk of sending it to patrol the border and show the flag there. Admiral Darakon himself wants to command those missions."

"I thought the supreme commander was more an administrative role."

"It is, but it's going to be a show of strength, not an actual combat mission."

"Really? Are you that sure the threat from the raiders is gone?"

Sith information on the raiders had been frustratingly spotty even before Darth Avanc's report. The news that the ancient Force abomination Abeloth had been commanding the raiders had sent shocks through the One Sith. Fifty years ago, the creature had turned another group of Sith into her playthings and had only been put down by the combined efforts of Luke Skywalker and Darth Krayt in a battle that had nearly killed both the Grand Master and the Dark Lord.

Veers scowled and prodded his food with a knife. "We broke their fleet and captured their flagship. Their commander is dead, apparently. The Jedi say they killed it. The problem is, the Jedi..."

"What *about* the Jedi?"

"There's some indication that the Jedi may have used classified Imperial intelligence when searching for the raiders' base."

"Admiral Fel?"

"Who else would it be? His brother and mother are both in the cult."

"So you could use it as an excuse to move against him. Arrest him or at least strip him of his command of the Fourth."

"Believe me, I've set things up so Bilbringi is as good as mine, but I'd need more proof before I go after Fel."

Kroan smirked. "Please. If you can't find incriminating evidence you can always make some up."

"I've thought about that. But frankly, the Jedi have been getting popular lately. So has Fel. They've both been on the front lines of all these battles."

"Then you'll have to turn public against them."

Veers narrowed his eyes. "If you have any advice, I'd appreciate it."

They were at the familiar impasse; they worked to the same goal but each had secrets it was best for the other not to know. After the

Battle of Kalee, the *Grievous* had escaped that system, apparently after a team of Jedi had refused to fire on it. Darth Kroan had invested considerable resources into tracking that ship, initially because it presented a random element that could interfere with his plans. Veers and Imperial intelligence had also tried to find it for similar reasons, but in the end the Sith had resources vermin did not.

He could explain everything he planned to do, but it was risky, and there was no need. A few nudges would suffice; Veers was a smart man. He'd figure out the rest.

"Here's some advice for you," Kroan said. "When you bring *Invincible* to its christening ceremony, make sure Avaris and Darakon both attend."

"They're planning on that anyway."

"Let me be more specific. Make sure they both leave Bastion and jump into orbit *together*. And make sure you're not with them."

It was as blunt as their talks ever got. A new seriousness settled over Veers' face as he calculated the timing, the things he'd have to do. If the Head of State and Supreme Commander were suddenly removed from the picture the Moff Council would have to call an emergency vote to select the next Head of State until a proper election could be held. Veers had plenty of allies on the Council but he needed to be sure; Kroan could feel his thoughts whirling in his Force aura.

Kroan sipped a little more wine and casually cut another piece off his nerf steak. He chewed it and swallowed and looked back at Veers; the man was still thinking, dinner all but forgotten in front of him.

"Don't let the food go to waste, Moff Veers," Kroan smiled teasingly. "After all, what's the point of having these, ah, *pleasures* if you can't enjoy them?"

When she returned to her house after being called to the communications center by the landing zone, Jade Skywalker Tainer stepped through the door heavy by the weight of everything she'd learned. She closed the door behind her, heard Nat and Kol in the

kitchen with the babysitter Jade had called on short notice, but didn't go to join them. Outside the noon sun shimmered bright on their homestead's endless fields; the sky was beautifully clear. The life she and her family had had on Fengrine these past years suddenly seemed perfect, now that she knew their idyll was over.

She stood there with her boots on the entry mat until Pella peeked her head out of the kitchen and said, "Jedi Skywalker, I thought I heard you! Are you alright?"

Pella was the daughter of one of their neighbors, a couple of humans who owned a farm two kilometers away. She had hair the color of straw, a pale freckled face and blue eyes that were always bright with energy. The children loved her. Pella was sixteen, Jade remembered dully. The same age she herself had been when her father had died.

Jade spent a few minutes listening to Pella chatter on without hearing a word of it. When the girl seemed done Jade politely thanked her for coming on short notice and paid her twice the usual fee. After thanking Jade profusely the girl went outside, got on her speeder bike, and flew off back home. Jade didn't watch her go; she stayed in the kitchen with Nat and Kol, who'd just finished the lunch Pella had made them.

Nat gathered the dished and took them over to be washed; it was the chore Jade had just introduced him to. The seven-year-old seemed intent on that alone but Kol stayed in his seat, watching his mother with those curious eyes that always seemed to know more than a three-year-old could say.

"Nat," Jade said. "Come here. The dishes can wait."

Her older son let theft them piled on the counter and walked back to the table. He sat down on the chair next to Kol and both Jade's sons looked up at her with serious faces. As young as they were, they knew something was wrong. In a family of Jedi there could never really be secrets.

"I just got a call from Ossus," she began, and immediately faltered. There was no way to explain to the children everything that she'd heard. Abeloth returned, Allana injured and Lowbacca's daughter dead along with a dozen other Jedi. The Sith reappeared

from nowhere. And their father, Jade's husband and closest friend since childhood, was now in their grasp.

Jodram wasn't dead. She knew she'd feel that, as certain as anything. The Sith might be torturing him this very second; they might kill him at any minute. It was an anxiety that would never go away until she found her husband or the unthinkable happened. Until either of those passed, she doubted she'd be able to think at all.

There was no way to tell any of that to the children so she tried to summon fragile hope. She bent close and placed a hand on either shoulder and squeezed. "Something happened on the mission your father went on. The Jedi.... don't know where he is."

"Do *you* know?" asked Nat.

She shook her head. "Not right now. But I'll find him. I swear it. Now, we don't have time to waste. Nat, get everything you think you'll need for a few weeks and pack your bag. Help Kol get everything *he* needs. We'll all be going away for a while."

"Where?" Kol asked.

"We'll all be going to Ossus. You'll stay at the Jedi Temple where it's safe. I'm going to go with a group of Jedi and we'll get your father back." She wanted to say more; she wanted to *promise* them she'd get Jodram back but hope only went so far. She knew the chances for a successful mission were painfully low. It was a miracle Jodram hadn't been killed already.

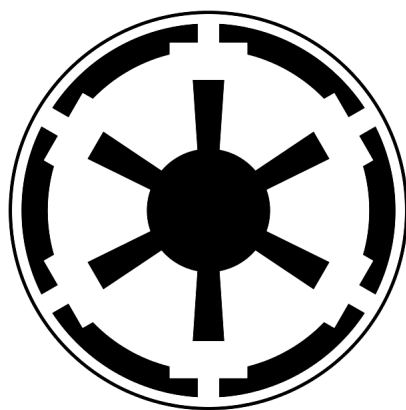
Maybe the boys sensed that; maybe they didn't. Nat nodded and so did Kol. They both looked too old for their ages. Jade's own childhood innocence had ended with the death of her mother at age four. When she looked in Kol's three-year-old eyes she couldn't bear the thought of him going through the same thing even younger.

She gave their shoulders one more squeeze and said, "Come on, get going. You've got a lot to pack."

And so they did as they were told. Nat led and Kol followed and then she was alone in the kitchen, surrounded by all the accumulations of a normal, quiet life with her husband and sons. And she knew- in her gut, in the Force- that no matter what she

and the Jedi found when they went searching for Jodram the normal quiet life was over. The days they'd shared as family would never come again.

PART III



BREAKING CHAINS

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As someone who'd traveled from one side of the galaxy to another and been to so many different star systems she'd long lost count, Tamar Skirata could say with some authority that in Imperial space everything, even the supposedly rough-and-tumble trading outposts on the edge of the territory, was comparatively buttoned-down.

Phaeda was one of those planets that had a reputation amongst Imperials as a place for scum and villains, but for Tamar it felt safer than most places she'd been to. There was still a visible police presence, and the city centers were kept clean and safe. It was only in the poorer neighborhoods, where the building went to shambles and the police disappeared, that one might feel unsafe, though even here Tamar wasn't worried. It could have easily been different; women were generally considered easier marks for thieves, kidnappers, and worse, and though Tamar was a little taller than most and knew how to carry a tough air someone still might have tried something. Once she donned her black-and-blue *beskar'gam* armor, everyone in the street kept a respectful and wary distance.

For Tamar it felt good to back inside her shell. It wasn't the kind of outfit you brought out of the closet on Bastion, but it was exactly appropriate for the meeting she'd been called to. It had been six

months since she'd last gotten a message from her cousin Dorn and over a year since she'd met any of her family face-to-face.

That *Man'dalor* Gevern Auchs had branded her a traitor and set her to be handed over to the Sith was no secret among the Mandalorians. That she'd escaped, been rescued by a Jedi, and eventually had a kid with him was no secret either, and the thought never left her that, if she ever did something to anger Auchs again, he knew exactly where to find her daughter. Every Mando knew that attacking someone was an attack on their whole family; Auchs wasn't stupid and there was no visible reason he'd want to bring all of Clan Skirata against him, but that possibility was always there, and it always left her a little on edge.

That was just one of the reasons she'd kept a low profile since leaving Arlen all those years ago. As long as she didn't try to move back to Mandalore and kept only sporadic, secret communication with her clan there was no cause for Auchs to act against any of them. The *Mand'ador* surely knew the Skiratas kept *some* contact with her, but as long it didn't get in his way he'd be content to ignore it. Polite fictions, as Dorn had once told her, were the backbone of all politics.

She wondered if he'd have any more bits of jaded wisdom to dispense as she walked through the market she'd been told to find him at. Unlike most Imperial worlds Phaeda had a human-minority population; the stalls and customers around her contained dozens of different species and the only thing they had in common was that they gave an armored Mandalorian wary looks and a wide berth. As she scanned the rows she found someone who didn't flinch from the mirror-black surface of her helmet's visor: a hulking Herglic whose broad grey-skinned body took up the entire span of the fruit-stall it manned.

Tamar wound her way through the crowd to the stall. The Herglic- she'd never been able to tell genders for that species- held out a round orange fruit and said, "Something for the road, miss?"

She picked it up with her gloved hands. "Is it sour?"

"Oh, no. Very sweet."

"Got anything sour?"

As she'd been told to expect, it scooped up a few of some red fruit with a webbed hand. "Only for the brave, miss. You're welcome to try one."

"You'll understand if I don't take you up on that," she said through her helmet. "Do you know anyplace where somebody like me could find some privacy?"

A toothy smile spread on its face. "I do, actually. Do you see that alley behind me? There's a very nice, very private establishment, second door on the right.

"Good to know." She took out a few credit chips and dropped them into his fruit-pile. "Might be back for the fruit later."

She did as the Herglic had instructed, shouldering her way past a beggar and slipping down an alley so narrow she could barely fit her armored shoulder-pads through. She found the appropriate door, knocked, and waited. When it slid open she was staring at the face of a Rodian.

"Finally," he said and waved her toward a second door. "They've been waiting on you for a while."

Tamar went through the next door, into a small square chamber with a low table in the middle and a colored-glass roof that let in dimmed rainbow light from the cloudy sky.

Seated at the table, cross-legged on the floor, were two figures in Mandalorian armor with their helmets removed. Her cousin Dorn had a face like hers: a sharp nose, narrow mouth, and black hair, though his was going an early gray. He sometimes said the color-change was thanks to the Kaminoan clone genes from three generations back, though more likely, she thought, it was because of the teenage girl seated across from him.

Dorn's daughter Ninet was six months older than Marin, edged into her fifteen year. She looked older and, to Tamar's view, acted older to. That was to be expected; children grew up fast among the Jedi but they grew even faster among Mandalorians, and at fourteen she was considered a newly-minted adult. Ninet about the same size as the cousin she'd never met and had the same black hair and dark eyes, the same still-soft roundness in the face that said she wasn't *quite* a grown-up, even if she was good at acting like one.

"How long did I *really* keep you waiting?" Tamar asked as she removed her helmet.

"A while," Dorn said, "But that's okay. Have some tea."

As he poured a still-steaming cup for her Tamar sat down at the table with her helmet beside her. "Tell me, is that fruit out there any good?"

"Not really." Dorn passed her the cup. "But he knows when to keep secrets and when not to."

"Been to Phaeda before then?"

"Enough to make a few friends," said Dorn. He picked up his small white cup, as did Ninet, and the three drank together.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you," Tamar said, "But I'm wondering why you called me here. I ended up having to skip out from Bastion at a very inconvenient time."

"Sounds like the Imps finally have their invader problem under control," Dorn said. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"It is. I was talking about the riots on Bastion that happened hours after I left."

"Family caught up in it?"

"Yes," Tamar grunted. "Nothing too serious, though."

Which was true enough; Vitor had been the one to break his arm while Marin had gotten only minor scrapes. The psychological spook of being caught in a murderous riot and stampede was something else; the Jedi kept their kids locked up in the academy meditating and mock-dueling so they had little appreciation for how mad and savage their fellow sentients could get. She only hoped Marin learned something from all this.

"Well, what we're here about is actually kind of the first thing," Dorn said. "The raider thing. Maybe."

She frowned and set down the cup. "You're not usually cryptic. What's going on?"

"We don't exactly know," said Ninet. "We *do* know that Gevern Auchs and his most trusted lieutenants went totally missing in action for about two weeks. A couple still haven't come back."

Auchs rounding up his top people for a special mission wasn't rare. That he'd try to keep the thing a secret wasn't either, nor was

the fact that someone would talk and let secrets slip; Mandos were boastful hard-drinking mercenaries, not intel agents.

"What else do you know?" Tamar asked.

"Just scraps," said Dorn. "Rumors, really, but they do point to something interesting. One, I heard from sources I'll keep unnamed that this mission took 'em into the Unknown Regions. Two, Auchs and most of his lieutenants came back to Mandalore just a day ago, after I called you. If you look at the timing and travel distance, they would have done this hypothetical job in uncharted space about four days ago."

"The same as the Bastion riots," she said. "Are you saying it's not a coincidence?"

"That part, probably. What have you heard about the Chiss getting involved?"

"Only that they were."

"Which isn't typical Chiss behavior."

"Not unless the raiders attacked them first. From what I've heard those aliens- whatever their goal was- fought like neks with rabies. It's a wonder none of them attacked Chiss space before this."

"I'm throwing that out there, to think about."

"You think *Auchs* attacked the Chiss?"

"I don't think anything. What I've *heard* is that we lost a couple dozen Mandos out there, whoever we were fighting."

"Hmmm. Sounds like they were strong enemies, then."

"Right. But the real kicker, the reason I called you four days back, is this." Dorn hunched forward and got a little grin on his face. "I know a guy who says he saw Galaset making a rendezvous just a day before Auchs- and Galaset and the rest of his inner circle- went missing."

That was intriguing, if true. The alien hunter was one of those trusted lieutenants that had been close to Auchs since his ascension to *Mand'alor* twenty years ago. "Are you sure your friend didn't mistake another Kerestian?"

"He wouldn't make a mistake. And the *real* kicker is where he saw Galaset and this human meet."

Tamar rolled her eyes. "If you're going to play games all day..."

"Broken Moon," Dorn said, grinning wide.

Tamar sighed. She looked down at her drink and sighed again. Her first trip to that smuggler's nest had been seventeen years ago; she hadn't expected the way it would change her life and even now she kind of didn't believe it, even though she had a daughter as irreversible proof.

"So what are you suggesting? That I go there and *ask* Sherev'ath if she did any eavesdropping on their conversation?"

"It *is* something she'd do. And for you she might even do a favor."

"Not me. The first time I met her I punched her in the face. It's Arlen she's... *grateful* toward."

"Well," Dorn shrugged. "Maybe she should be your next stop."

Having close dealings with Sherev'ath, the Twi'lek slave turned crime boss, was something Tamar generally tried to avoid. She also tried to avoid doing too much with Arlen, for totally different reasons. Unfortunately, this was potentially too big to walk away from. If there was a chance she could uncover another truth about whatever was going on in the Unknown Regions she felt compelled to look into it; for Marin's safety if nothing else. And frankly, if she could use whatever she learned as a weapon against Gevern Auchs, that would make things worthwhile too.

"I'll swing by Bastion and see what I can do," she said. "What about you too?"

Ninet said, "We were thinking of swinging by Broken Moon ourselves."

"Really?" Broken Moon was on the opposite side of the Outer Rim from Phaeda; it wasn't a place you just swung by.

"If you or any other relations go in that direction," said Dorn, "We'll be there to back you up."

"So you'll hang around here in the meantime?"

"Phaeda has its charms. You just have to look really hard."

"I'll keep that in mind for the next time I come here. But it sounds like I'd better get back to Bastion."

"Yes, sure does."

She swallowed the last of her tea- still hot- and got to her feet. Before she put her helmet on she said, "Thanks for the tip. I'll see you both around."

"*Re'turcye mhi, ner vod*," Dorn said.

It had been a long time since she'd had *Mando'a* thrown at her regularly. She fumbled for a second before saying, "*Re'turcye mhi, Dorn'ika, Nin'ika*."

Then she put on her *buy'c* and for a second it felt like old times, before she'd first gone to Broken Moon and met the damned Jedi who'd changed her life. But only for a second.

After a thorough review of the damages sustained at Sevok-358, the chief operations director of the Bilbringi Shipyards gave Davek a six-week estimate until all the ships of the Fourth Fleet were fully repaired. Six weeks was a long time; six weeks ago his father had still been alive and the alien raiders merely a severe irritant instead of an existential threat to the Empire.

Vice Admiral Jaeger was a Voidwalker, once the chief helm officer on Davek's frigate, and he trusted the man's estimate implicitly, but he knew it would take even longer for the Fourth to be what it once was. Too many ships had been outright destroyed in these battles and far, far too many lives have been lost.

Making things worse was the fact that his official duties prevented even a short trip to Bastion. His older son had been injured in the Ravelin riots; he'd heal fine but not being near Vitor at a time like this made him feel like he was being forced to surrender his duties as a father. Arlen and his mother were on Bastion now and they'd make sure he was being taken care of, but that didn't matter. Davek knew that a father should be there for his children, just as Jagged Fel had been there for him.

He was at least able to place calls to Bastion and speak with his family at the Jedi academy. Vitor looked hale except for the sling around his arm and Davek enjoyed those talks a lot more than the other ones he was having with the capital. Neither Darakon nor Avaris had come out to Bilbringi yet to see the battle damage and repair process themselves; they were both sticking at Bastion and

getting ready to welcome the newest symbol of Imperial resurgence, the super star destroyer *Invincible* fresh from Kuat Drive Yards' main facilities. That the thing was set to arrive exactly one week after the Battle of Sevok-358 felt like some kind of bitter universal irony. As much as he hated the very existence of that overexpensive military vanity project, pushed by nominally-civilian moffs like Veers and Thane more than anyone, he hoped its regal unveiling would act as a deterrent if any of those raiders decided to launch another attack on Imperial territory. According to the vessels from the Third Fleet patrolling the border sectors there hadn't been a sign of them, which was something to be thankful for.

He tried to keep that in mind as he finished giving the Head of State the latest update on the repair process. Neela Avaris's blue holo-image hovered in front of him the whole time, nodding and asking occasional questions, and when he wrapped up his talk, he had a feeling that would be the end of it.

Then Avaris took it in a direction he hadn't expected and frankly didn't want it to go in. She said, with the familiar warmth a politician could turn on and off at will, "Thank you, Admiral Fel. I'm glad to see the repair process is going as scheduled. By the way, I just wanted to ask if your son is recovering well."

He knew she meant it as a polite inquiry, a show of personal concern with a trusted subordinate. Instead it triggered a low anger that had been with him since the riots, buried beneath all his other problems but still there. "Vitor's doing much better now, thank you."

"That's good to hear." Like a politician she briskly moved on. "One last thing. Since you've been in contact with your family I was also wondering if you'd made any progress in learning *how* the Jedi search teams located Sevok-358."

"I've asked, but I'm afraid I haven't gotten an answer." Davek was no politician but he'd learned how to lie. Doing it over blurry holo-transmission made it all the easier. "The Jedi who found it were not *our* Jedi. They set out from Ossus. As you can image, they want to protect their intel sources as much as we did."

"Of course," Avaris said. "If you don't mind making some more *discrete* inquiries, I'd very much appreciate it. I know the Supreme Commander would as well. We're all very concerned about operational security and the validity of our intel sources."

She clearly didn't believe him. Davek hated having to lie for his brother; a part of him hated Arlen for putting him in this position in the first place, but there was simply no other option that wouldn't disgrace him, his family, and the Jedi Order on Bastion all at once.

He hated being pushed too; he knew Avaris would keep going on this and suddenly decided to push back. "I promise I'll do everything I can. I'd hate for there to be any confusion. I don't want the government to allow good will toward the Jedi to be tarnished."

Her brows drew together. "I'm sorry, Admiral Fel, I'm not sure what you're talking about. My administration has been nothing but supportive of the Jedi."

"You've supported my efforts to incorporate them into the military. I'm thankful for that, believe me."

"Then what *are* you talking about, Admiral?"

She wasn't going to let it go either; at least he'd gotten her off the topic of the intel leak. "May I speak plainly?"

"Please," she said coolly.

"In the midst of everything else I've been following the aftermath of the latest Bastion riots. As you can understand, I've a personal interest. I know the legal system will take time to process accused offenders, but the way your office has been handling the issue is, frankly, unsatisfactory."

"Go on." An order, not a request.

"Those riots started because some hardline old-style Imperials wanted to use Grand Moff Kaine's birthday as an excuse to hold a rally."

"Citizens have a right to free assembly, Admiral."

"And they should. But they- and others- came to that assembly spoiling for a fight. They got it and people were killed."

"Are you suggesting I lay down draconian security measures in the capital?"

"I'm saying we can't have extremists throwing bombs in the streets. I'm the organizations that took part in those riots should be investigated; their members should be placed under surveillance and their leaders arrested."

"To keep the peace," she said sourly.

"Yes. Exactly. Especially the hardline old-style High Human Culture types who've been working very hard to alienate the non-humans who are just as much citizens of the Empire as they are."

When it all came out he couldn't believe he'd spoken so brazenly. Avaris seemed to glare at him across lightyears. "I am not blind to the threat of extremism and I do *not* sympathize with High Human Culture types. I am trying to preserve the peace *and* preserve the system of government we have now: open, plural, and democratic. One that can accommodate *all* our citizens."

In doing so she was coddling the exact types she should have been opposing and giving free reign to men like Corrien Veers, but Davek knew he shouldn't say anything except, "I understand."

"You should, because that's the kind of government *your* father lived and died to protect. I'm trying to *protect* Jagged Fel's legacy."

"So am I. Believe that."

"I do." Her expression softened just a little. "Is there anything *else* you wish to speak of, Admiral Fel?"

"No, Head of State."

"Good. I'll speak with you later, Admiral. Tomorrow I will be busy at this time so please prepare your report for Supreme Commander Darakon. Good day."

The holo winked out. Davek stood in front of the lightless holo-projector and stared at it. Finally, he lifted a hand and smacked himself in the face.

"Oh, that was *stupid*," he said as pain stung his cheek. The piled-up stress and anger and grief was finally getting to him. Worst of all, she'd been *right*. Avaris' weaknesses as a leader- her equivocation, her tolerance for sympathy toward extremists, her subtly pandering to men like Moff Veers- were less the result of flaws in her character as they were inevitable by-products of the democracy his father had helped create. In peacetime a government could get by on those

qualities; in time of crisis, when extremes naturally rose to become threats, something stronger was needed to keep order.

It was a dangerous thought. He was his father's son and he knew where turning from democracy could lead. But when he looked at it hard, what he'd just considered wasn't wrong. It was an honest appraisal of a bad situation.

All the more reason to hope this crisis was over, that the Empire without an emperor could go back to muddling along in an ambivalent and democratic fashion. For a few weeks they'd come close to the edge; now it seemed like they were stepping away.

He only hoped nothing came along to give them another push.

In the end only a half-dozen Jedi Knights stayed with Marasiah at Bilbringi. The rest retreated to Bastion along with Arlen. That had included injured knights, knights who had family at the Academy they wanted to get back, and knights who were simply sick of fighting and needed a break. The part of Marasiah that was still a soldier couldn't help but look down on that last group a little; that same part respected the ones who'd stayed all the more.

There was work enough to do on Bilbringi. In addition to overseeing repairs on their TIE fighters, Marasiah and the other Jedi helped Davek's tactical staff analyze recordings of the battle at Sevok-358 and compiled thorough action reports for Fleet Command. There was also enough spare time for them to be Jedi: to practice, meditate, and enjoy small pleasures.

Meditation had always come hard for Marasiah; she'd spent her whole life wanting to do things that doing nothing, intentionally, was hard. Her mother-in-law had confided similar difficulties, which made her feel a little better. After a long day reviewing post-battle analyses, she retreated to the temporary cabin she and Davek had been assigned while the *Makati* underwent heavy repairs. Davek was out working still and she settled herself on the floor, cross-legged, eyes-closed, and tried to push back all the stress: the lists of duties to perform, haunting stories of Abeloth, all her personal concerns for Davek's peace of mind, for her sons' safety,

for Arlen to get his act and together and realize he should be helping his brother, not fighting him.

Emptying her mind was hard, too hard, and she was starting to get frustrated when her comlink started to buzz. Eager for the escape she scooped it up; there was an incoming hail. She got off the floor and stalked to the cabin's communications node. With the tap of a button she summoned a familiar but unexpected face.

"Is this a bad time?" Korosh Vull asked.

"Your timing is good, actually. What's going on? I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"Well, I thought I'd offer congratulations first. The news-nets aren't exactly clear what happened in the big fight, but they are saying the Jedi came out well. You in particular."

"I did my part, but the real heroes are Arlen and Allana Djo. They did the hard part."

"The former chief of state?" Vull's brows raised.

"She's back to being a Jedi now."

"Hmm," Vull said, like he was still trying to wrap his mind around it. She noticed that he, along with most Imperial citizens, had a mental barricade in his head separating the Jedi knights from Bastion with the *other* Jedi like Allana or Lowbacca, the ones based on Ossus or Bestine or Illum. That always frustrated Arlen, who viewed the Jedi Order as a big sprawling entity that superseded mundane political loyalties, but to Marasiah it had never seemed so difficult. She saw no inherent clash between serving the light side of the Force and serving the Empire; not the Empire as it was now, anyway.

"Are you at Bastion now?" she asked Vull.

"That's right. Calling from *Sentinel* actually."

"Have you been down to the planet, to Ravelin? What's the mood like?"

"You want a summary of public opinion?" She nodded; he sighed. "It's complicated. When news came down we won the battle everyone was ecstatic- civilians, soldiers, everyone. And they're still relieved, if uncertain, because people aren't sure exactly *what* was the deal with the raiders."

He paused, like he was hoping she'd elaborate. She wasn't sure she understood Abeloth herself and doubted she could explain it to a man who, she gathered, had never much believed in the Force and still wouldn't if his friend and fellow Voidwalker hadn't turned Jedi.

Thankfully, she had an easy out. "It's all still classified by Fleet Command, sorry."

"Well, I guess I'll keep on being confused," Vull said, half humor, half exasperation. "Anyway, the good news for you is that people are giving the Jedi credit for the victory, even if they're not sure exactly what you did. But over the past few days people have been getting.... unsettled again."

"Why?"

"Because nobody knows if it's really over. Do you?" Grimly, she shook her head. "I thought so. And so everyone's starting to get edgy again, even if they're not quite as edgy as before."

"People can feel as edgy as they want. I just don't want to see any more riots in the streets."

"No one does. But everyone wants to get their points across too."

"Not every points deserves to get across," she muttered. It was something Davek had griped recently.

"Perhaps," Vull said, then brightened his tone. "That should chance soon, though."

It took her a second to remember. "*Invincible*. That should give people confidence."

"I'm sure it will. Avaris and Darakon plan to give it a very formal, very *publicized* commissioning ceremony when it arrives at Bastion."

She recalled her father-in-law's funeral and admitted Avaris could do good theater. "Does the First have everything planned yet? Personnel assignments, material distribution?"

"It took some last-minute shuffles, but it's all been decided." Vull smiled. "You're looking at *Invincible*'s new Commander of the Air Group."

"*You?*"

He laughed. "Don't sound so horrified."

"I'm not. Of course not. Congratulations. That's a huge honor."

"Thank you. I'm a little surprised myself."

"Admiral Hallis must have taken a shine to you."

"I like to think so, but he plays his sabacc cards close. Still, there's a lot of prep work to do. When the commissioning happens we'll still only have a third of the ship's TIE wing stocked, mostly pulled from other ships. We're still waiting on a shipment of factory-fresh units from Sienar to fill out the hangar."

"I'm sure *Invincible* will have the best fighter corps in the Empire when you're done with it. Congratulations. I'm happy for you. Happy for everyone you're protecting."

"All right, that's enough flattery. I just wanted to check in. And brag a little. But there's still plenty of work to do, like I said."

"Good luck with that, Korosh."

"Thank you. I'd say the same, but I think Jedi have a different way of putting it."

"Slightly, but the gist is the same."

"All right, then good luck. Next time you wing over to Bastion I'll probably busy, but drop me a line anyway. I just might have some time."

She promised to do that, killed the holo, and looked around the cabin. Vull's news *had* made her feel better. Knowing a friend would be there over Bastion, protecting the planet, protecting her *sons*, granted her an inner calm she hadn't felt since Davek's father died. She even found herself with a new appreciation for the oversized, ultra-expensive war machine the Kuatis would be delivering in a few days.

With a new warmth inside, she sat down on the floor where she'd failed at meditation and decided to try again.

Whenever Marin saw both her parents together she was reminded why they spent all their time apart. No matter how often she'd insisted that what had happened during the Ravelin riots was no one's fault and that she was completely fine, she knew that her father was looking at Tamar with barely-restrained blame for being off-planet when it all went down.

Tamar was doing her best to ignore it. She'd just finished explaining what she'd learned on her trip to Phaeda. Marin didn't understand all of it- she only vaguely knew of Broken Moon as some kind of crime den mentioned by both her parents on rare occasions- and she didn't know who this Sherev'ath person was, or this Galaset. She did know Gevern Auchs was the Mandalore who'd tried to have her mother killed, and she'd heard about Dorn and Ninet and always wondered what her *other* cousins would be like in person. When Tamar said they'd be heading to Broken Moon too it piqued her interest further.

"It certainly sounds like it's worth investigating," Marin's grandmother said. They were gathered in Jaina's apartment: Arlen, Tamar, Marin, Vitor with his arm in a sling, the old Master herself. Only Roan was absent.

"It's vague... but intriguing," Arlen said reluctantly. "Broken Moon is on the other side of the galaxy and I'm not sure we can stand to be away so long. Do you really think Sherev'ath can tell us anything?"

"She'll tell *you*," Tamar said with an eye-roll that made Arlen's upper lip twitch.

"Things seem like they're settling down, finally," Jaina said. "They'll be bringing in that brand new super star destroyer in a few days. If that doesn't keep Bastion safe nothing will."

"Well, hopefully the raiders are broken for good," Arlen said grimly. "We lost enough taking Abeloth out."

"What's the word from Ossus?" asked Vitor. Like Marin he'd been filled in on the strange and frightening truth behind the raiders' attacks. "Are the Jedi sending out another search party?"

"They'll do everything they can to find Abeloth," Jaina said. "And Jodram Tainer. But that's nothing for *you* to be concerned about, young man. You need to rest and heal that arm of yours."

"The doctors say I'll be good to get this thing off in a couple days." He rapped a fist against the metal cast.

"That's good to know, but your grandmother's still right. You're staying put." Arlen said and looked to Tamar. "And you're right too."

This does need looking into. And I guess I'm the one who has to do it."

"Then it looks like I'm going with you." Marin's mother crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll pass word to Dorn and Ninet. They'll meet us there."

"Okay." Her father exhaled deeply, like he was calculating the length of the trip. "We'll take *Starlight Champion* for a whirl. It hasn't gotten enough use lately."

"And leave *my* ship on Bastion?"

"You know it's perfectly safe in the Jedi academy. If we need to split up for any reason you'll have your cousin's ship."

"How reassuring."

"What? There's nothing wrong with *Champ*. Or my flying skills."

"That's not what I was worried about."

"Good. We'll take *Champ* then."

"Okay. We will."

That seemed to settle things, so Marin finally let out the words she'd been holding in for five minutes. "I want to come too."

Despite being out of sync so often, her parents managed to say "Absolutely not!" at exactly the same time.

She looked back and forth between them. "A Jedi's supposed to *do* something, isn't she, Dad? And Mom, didn't you say that Mandalorians are considered adults at my age?" They both opened their mouths but she pressed on. "I'm serious. After all that's happened I can't just sit around in the academy doing nothing and being *safe*. Why do you think we sneaked out to Ravelin?"

"She's right," Vitor said. "We're not kids. We *can't* be after what happened to Grandpa. We can't just sit around either."

Tamar met her daughter's eyes and Marin felt a jolt of understanding between them. Arlen, strangely embarrassed, looked at his mother. Something passed between them too, and Arlen said, "Another mission, maybe, but not this."

"Why? I'll have *both* of you to teach me, and look out for me if there's trouble. When else is that going to happen?"

Tamar nodded slightly. Arlen sighed. Jaina said, "She has a point. Frankly it might be best for all three of you."

"I know, I know." Arlen shook his head. "You're right, Mom. And Marin. I know you are. It's just..."

"What?" pressed Marin.

"Neither of you have met Sherev'ath before."

Tamar actually laughed. "You nearly got killed fighting a timeless Force abomination and you're scared of one little Twi'lek *dal'ika*?"

"Not scared for me. I'm just... You know."

Tamar looked at her daughter. "Your father's afraid you'll never see him in the same light again."

Marin had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. "You're saying I can go, right?"

"I think you will," Jaina said, and as always the old woman had the final word on the subject. Then she told Vitor, "*You*, young man, are going to stay here with Roan and me and finish your recuperation. Next time there's a chance to go gallivanting around the galaxy it'll be your turn, but not yet? Understood?"

Like the rest of them, Vitor knew not to argue. "Yes, absolutely."

"Very good." Jaina looked at her son and flashed a slim, triumphant smile. "I'm glad that's all settled. Aren't you?"

"You know, you're normally complaining you don't get to spend enough time with your kid," Chance reminded him.

Arlen sighed and slumped back in the co-pilot's seat. He'd been running checks in *Starlight Champion's* cockpit, felt restless, and decided to try hailing his friend on Coruscant. As luck would have it, Chance had been available.

"It's not Marin herself that's the problem."

"Her mom, then?"

"No. Well, yes. But no."

"You're getting less comprehensible with age."

"It's where we're *going* for this mission."

When he didn't go on Chance raised a brow. "Are you trying to make me guess?"

"Why not? It'll be a trip down memory lane for me and Tamar. If you wanna come we'd have the whole set."

His eyes widened. "Ah. Sherev'ath. Broken Moon."

"Exactly."

"You're wrong, though."

"How?"

"If we got the whole set together we'd need that Sith too."

Arlen grunted. Chance didn't know it, but according to a Jedi who'd survived Sevok-358, they'd encountered a Barabel Sith that sounded strikingly similar to the one who'd try to kill him at Broken Moon all those years ago, and who Arlen thought they'd later killed at the cost of his apprentice Wharn's life.

"The three of us," Arlen said, "Is enough."

"Did you ever tell Marin exactly how her mom and dad met?"

"No. I'm pretty sure Tamar hasn't either."

"Well. You're going to have to explain it on the way, unless you want Sherev'ath to do it for you."

He sighed again. "Thankfully it's a long ride out there, so we'll have time."

"Good to hear. Speaking of reunion and coincidence, I'll be swinging out to Kuat in a few days."

"Is Volgma coming with?"

"He is, actually. We're trying to negotiate a contract as a distributor for KDY."

"And you just happen to be old buddies with the chairman of the board."

"Like I said, coincidence. Still, we'll be putting on a good pitch for him and his pals. It'll all be totally above-board."

"Glad to hear it. Wine and dine afterward?"

"Naturally. I haven't actually seen Retor face-to-face in... three years?"

"Well, he's on Kuat full-time since he took over the Board."

"Exactly."

"You're a responsible family man, Chance. No more late nights and endless parties."

"I'm aware, but the same goes for you too."

"Trust me, I won't go all wild at Broken Moon."

"You sure? I've heard Sherev'ath knows how to throw a party."

"Yeah, but they're not my type. And I'm too old. A couple weeks ago I went to this club in Ravelin and I... never mind, it was weird."

"Take care of Marin," Chance said pointedly.

"I will. We're not doing this lightly."

"At least things in Imperial space are settled down now.... Right? Or can you tell me?"

"I *hope* so." Arlen spread his hands. "All I know, all I can tell."

"Fair enough." Chance tilted his head to hear something. "Family calls. Take care of yourself at Broken Moon."

"Take care of *yourself* on Kuat."

"Yeah, that'll be hard. Talk to you later."

"Later," Arlen said, and shut the holo off. That little twinge of melancholy came back. He heaved one more sigh and went back to work.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Despite his chirping voice and diminutive frame, Kyrr Esch was able to convey a sense of authority even when reduced to a quarter-size holographic transmission. It was, Allana thought, one of the reasons he made an effective Chief of State.

"I will pass your report directly to the Defense Committee and the Supreme Commander," he told Allana as she sat in her chamber in the Jedi Temple on Ossus. It was a visitor's room, designated as hers for as long as it took to recover from the injuries she'd sustained fighting Abeloth.

She'd told Kyrr Esch about Abeloth and everything else related to her mission in the Unknown Regions. On her last appearance fifty years ago the near-immortal being had nearly brought down the Alliance. Mere mention of her name had caused Esch's tone to deepen in dread.

"Tell me," the Mrlssi said. "What will you do now, Allana?"

"I'm set to recuperate." She smiled weakly and held up her broken arm, now stiffly bent in its cast. Bacta had healed the effects of her brief vacuum exposure but bones would take longer to heal.

"And the Jedi?"

"We'll be sending more search teams to try and find Abeloth."

"You're certain she's still alive, tsi?"

"We can gather she had at least two Erath bodies- one male, one female. We only destroyed the first one."

"Do you think she'll be able to muster another invasion fleet?"

"I can't say. Losing a body injures Abeloth and we killed two. After that she couldn't control the raiders at Sevok-358. My guess is that she might be able to muster more but she'll need to heal first."

"Then the time to strike is soon."

"Can I make a bold proposition, Kyrr?"

"Tsi, I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

She smiled softly. "My proposition is this: send some armed ships to Karn'erath. The Jedi will provide you with the location."

"You said the Erath homeworld is a wasteland."

"Exactly. They've been struck hard by a plague. I promised them I'd help. If the Alliance sends its best medical personnel to research a cure-"

Esch raised a down-covered hand. "I understand. A mercy mission with armed backup, just in case."

"Exactly."

"I believe I would be able to send a small relief force using my executive authority."

"I knew I could count on you. Tell whoever you send to expect Jedi. We'll be sending people there too."

"Your first step in searching for Abeloth?"

"Pretty much."

"I understand. I'll instruct our team to give the Jedi any help they ask for."

"Great." Allana glanced at the chrono on her bedstand. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have another meeting to go to."

"Busy even when recovering, tsi? You Jedi are durable beings."

She couldn't feel warm at the compliment; the memory of the battle at Sevok-358 and the brutal deaths of over a dozen knights was all too fresh. She did her best to smile anyway. "Thanks, Kyrr. I'll speak with you again."

She shut off the transmitter and rose from her chair. Her whole body ached as she moved. As she threw on her brown Jedi robe she watched her stiff movements in the mirror, watched her face. It

looked heavy and lined and sunlight through the window caught the gray in her hair. The last time she'd been badly injured was when that Vong shaper had stabbed her at the climax of the Senex-Juvex Crisis. Recovery from that poisoned blade had taken a while but eventually she'd felt healed, young. Recovery was slower now. She was in her fifties and youth was a long time gone.

There was a knock on the door. She shuffled over and opened it to see Tanith Zel and Jade Skywalker right behind her. Jade had arrived from Fengrine just a few hours ago; Allana immediately spotted the impatience in her eyes and her grim determination in the Force.

Without smiling Jade said, "It's good to see you're all right."

"I've been better, but thanks." Tanith stepped aside so Allana could wrap the younger woman in a tight hug. Jade was no longer the restless teenager she'd help train in the Force; she was a woman with a husband and two sons, losses and accomplishments in her name. Despite that a part of Allana would always think of her as the girl she'd been; vulnerable, hesitant, needy for guidance.

They left Allana's room and began walking through the Temple's halls. Jade said, "The others are waiting for us. I've talked with Lowbacca and Master Saav'etu already. And Jedi Qemar."

"Then you know everything we know about Jodram."

"Pretty much. I *know* he's still alive. I'd feel otherwise. But as to what the Sith are *doing* to him—"

"Try not to think about that," Allana said. "Tanith, anything from Hapes?"

"Nothing new. Queen Demia held a ceremony to honor her granddaughter. Our spies say she was very shaken up by it. We still don't know how Serissa died, though."

"Nothing about the Sith?" Jade asked.

"No, but there's never been before. We're not even certain the Sith *are* on Hapes."

"Of course they are. After what they did there already."

Tanith nodded grimly; they'd both lost parents when the Sith-assisted coup expelled the Jedi from Hapes. Allana said, "The Sith might have Jodram but there's no guarantee they'd take him back to

Hapes, or any other base. They took him aboard an Erath ship. That says to me they're trying to find Abeloth's base of operations."

The implication was that searching for Abeloth meant searching for Jodram. It also meant searching for Sith. Fifty the Jedi had fought both those enemies at once; Allana had been forced to take a life for the first time during that desperate struggle, when she was only seven years old. She'd watched another dear friend sacrifice his own.

She wanted to tell Jade to have hope and trust the Jedi would rescue Jodram and defeat both those foes, but the younger woman wouldn't believe it either.

The Jedi gathered in a meeting room on an upper level of the Temple's pyramid. Even when she'd lived on Ossus Jade had come here only rarely. It was the chamber her father had used to convene with the Jedi Council and other Masters. They sat down on the cushioned floor now: Jade next to Allana, Grand Master Lowbacca still emanating grief for the loss of his daughter, the old Bothan Yaqeel Saav'etu and the similarly grey-furred little Chandra-Fan Tekli. A life-sized holo image projected the form of Tahiri Veila, currently on Zonama Sekot, and another showed Jade's aunt Jaina on Bastion.

The last knight was one Jade was unfamiliar with, a blue-skinned female Duros. She sat cross-legged in front of a closed rectangular case about a third of a meter long. It seemed to be made of a very old, chipped wood with metal hinges and frame.

Instead of explaining what the case was for, they began recounting experiences of facing Abeloth. Allana summarized her battle aboard the Erath flagship. Jaina spoke of the time she, Luke Skywalker, and Corran Horn had fought one of her bodies on Coruscant fifty years ago. Tahiri had the most interesting story; she'd fought Abeloth twice, once when she'd possessed the fast-decaying body of an Imperial officer, and again when her life force had seeped into the circuits of a computer core.

"I had a lot of help both times," Tahiri said, "And Master Sebatyne was the one who really took out the computer core. But

the other time what really destroyed Abeloth's body was the thermal detonator I used." A thermal detonator wasn't a mere grenade; it vaporized absolutely everything within its blast radius. "What really saved me was that the body Abeloth used was so weak it was already falling apart. The other bodies were different."

"Force-users' bodies are more durable for her," Tekli said. "They can withstand Abeloth's great raw power."

"So you're saying the more powerful the Force-user, the longer the body will last," said Jade. "That means the Erath she took over must have been very strong."

"I've noticed something else too after listening to your descriptions." Tahiri's blue holo-image looked to Jaina's. "When you fought her Coruscant, wasn't she using a Sith's body?"

"Yes, and no matter how much damage we did we couldn't take her down. Ben had to do that in the Maw."

"If you'll remember, Wyn Dorvan killed another of her bodies with a few close-range shots from a hold-out blaster," Tahiri said. "That one belonged to another non-Jedi."

"Then a stronger Force-user is also more difficult to kill," said Tekli. "It *does* make sense. From what we've heard it was *very* hard to kill..."

The Chandra-Fan trailed off awkwardly. Master Saav'etu said, "Sothais was a very powerful Jedi. And Abeloth touched him when he was a child. Just like she touched me, and a lot of other Jedi."

Allana asked softly, "Can you describe a little of what that was like?"

The old Bothan hunched in on herself. "It felt like... a dream, in retrospect. A nightmare. We suddenly became absolutely certain that the Jedi around us- our friends and family- were impostors. We knew deep as we'd known anything that what was around us was a delusion and the only way to get to the truth was to get back to *her*."

Lowbacca gave a low, mournful growl.

"So she could take our bodies," Saav'etu admitted. "We're lucky most of us were far away from her when she tried to take hold of us."

A grim silence settled over the group. Allana said, "To reel things back a moment, we agree the first body we faced was so hard to kill because it was Master Saar's. The *other* body we fought was just as powerful. Isn't Abeloth supposed to be weaker after you kill one of her bodies?"

"That's the way it seemed before," Jaina said.

Lowbacca growled that, given what happened to the raider fleet, Abeloth had still been weakened significantly.

"I agree," said Tahiri. "As for how hard that second body was to kill.... My guess is that Abeloth just possessed an extraordinarily powerful Force user."

Two, Lowbacca reminded them. A king and a queen.

"Okay," Jade sighed. She knew this was an important discussion to have but she was restless to go after Jodram. She'd barely slept since he'd gone missing; every part of her was waiting for the pain of his death to tear at her through the Force. "So we have an idea of how incredibly powerful Abeloth is. When we *do* find her, what are we supposed to do? I remember what my grandfather said he did the last time. He left his body and went to the Maw and entered some... shadow realm where he fought Abeloth's true form."

"With the help of a Sith," Jaina added grimly. "Darth Krayt."

"I don't want to sound pessimistic, but if the two most powerful Force-users in our lifetimes couldn't kill Abeloth for good, what are *we* going to do?"

Lowbacca gave a low roar and extended a furry hand to the Duro who'd been sitting quietly this whole time.

"I think," said Tekli, "We should let Master Ohali Soroc explain."

"Masters Lowbacca and Tekli are the ones who made it possible," the Duros said. "They helped Raynar Thul communicate with the Killiks and learn the story of how Abeloth came to be."

"Wasn't she from a planet in the Maw?" asked Jade.

"That was where she'd been imprisoned millenia ago. But she began as a mortal being who served three powerful Force-entities called the Ones."

"Your great-grandfather encountered them during the Clone Wars," Jaina said. "They were on a free-floating monolith called Mortis. There was a brother who exemplified the Dark Side and a sister who exemplified the Light. And there was a father who kept balance between them."

"Abeloth wanted to become the mother," Tekli continued. "She became immortal like them but was locked away by the ancient Celestials. When the Ones encountered Anakin, the father tried to get him to be the new balance-keeper. In the end all three of the Ones were killed, leaving Abeloth alone."

"I remember now," Jade said. "That's why she kidnapped my father. She wanted to use him to create the family she never had."

"She reached out to your grandfather too," Jaina added.

"Whenever she reaches out to you, it's like a cold tentacle of... need," Saav'etu added darkly. "She's desperate and lonely. That's the worst part. It's what fuels her power."

Jade asked Soroc, "What does all this mean? How does it help us get rid of her?"

"According to the story about Anakin Skywalker, the Ones were killed using a special Force-imbued dagger. After he defeated Abeloth, your grandfather assigned ten knights to search the galaxy until they found Mortis and recovered the dagger."

Soroc carefully pulled back the lid of the case in front of her. Jade leaned forward to see, as did the other Jedi. They might have known Soroc's story but all of them bristled with anticipation to see what they'd never seen before.

The Dagger of Mortis was an old metal blade, two-sided and as long as Jade's forearm, with what looked to be a wood-wrought handle. It was such a simple thing, visible worn at the edges and primitive compared to lightsabers or vibroblades, but looking at it Jade felt a strange certainty that this was more than just an old weapon; the object had been imbued with some Force power she could never understand.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"It's a very long story," Soroc said. "Almost twenty-five years, in fact, but we found it. We found Mortis and we retrieved the blade."

The pride was obvious in Soroc's voice and Force aura. The long search for this object and its eventual retrieval was more than just her greatest accomplishment; it had become her purpose as a Jedi.

Jade looked at Lowbacca. "Do we *know* this will kill Abeloth?"

The Wookiee moaned that her grandfather had believed. That wasn't certainty, but Jade knew it was as close as they'd get.

"So we take the dagger with us to Karn'erath," Jade said. "You all know I'm going. Who else?"

"I think we can agree that it's dangerous for me to go," Saav'etu said.

"I would go," Allana said, "But Lowbacca insists I stay here and recuperate."

Tahiri added sourly, "He also insisted Jaina and I aren't in the condition to brawl with Abeloth again."

Lowbacca trilled that none of them were as young as they used to be. Jaina scowled and said, "Not all of us age with the grace of a Wookiee, sorry."

That got a brief huffing chuckle from Lowbacca. It warmed Jade to see the Grand Master hadn't lost all his humor, even in grief. What came next surprised her. He roared loudly, announcing that he would go with them to Karn'Erath.

Soroc added, "I'll be going too. To watch over the Dagger and help in any other way I can."

"I'm glad," Jade said and turned to Allana. "I have a request, since you'll be here. Look after Kol and Nat, please."

"Of course. It would be my honor."

"And please..." It was hard to think, hard to say. "If something happens to me or Jodram, or both of us, I don't know how it will affect the boys."

She only knew how losing her mother had affected her. Allana knew it too, and nodded gravely. "I promise. They'll be my first priority."

"Trust Allana to take care of them, Jade, then focus on *your* first priority," Jaina said. "Do what can be done. Let the Force guide you and don't get distracted by what's behind you or what could have been."

Long ago she'd given advice like an old sage lecturing a child. Now she spoke as an adult to an adult; a woman weighted with the fresh pain of her husband's loss, speaking to another who might face the same.

Jade felt something well in her throat and swallowed it down. "Thank you. And I know. When the time comes... I'll do whatever has to be done."

She held her aunt's stern holo-replicated gaze. They didn't need proximity and the Force to pass full meaning between them. For the rest of the Jedi on the team, the first priority was to find Abeloth and use the Mortis dagger to kill her. The second priority was to deal with whatever Sith they found hunting the same prey.

For Jade those were both secondary goals. Her greatest purpose was to rescue Jodram and save her children from the agony of their father's death. No matter how ancient and powerful Abeloth was, no matter the danger she represented, she'd never be more important to Jade than Jodram; her husband, her best and oldest friend.

He could remember how it had happened, a long time ago. For the two of them, at least, it had been a lull in the middle of the Senex-Juvex crisis. They'd returned from their mission to Varadan with more mental scars than physical ones. Jade had gone off to Zonama Sekot with her father to figure out a way to defeat Darth Xoran and her superweapon, leaving Jodram and Wharn behind.

Not having Jade around was hard; it had been during those weeks that Jodram had finally forced himself to admit that he thought of her as more than a longtime friend and fellow apprentice. Her absence had been a constant ache and he'd tried without success to put her out of his mind.

Jodram had been able to tell that Wharn missed Jade as well, but it was a different kind of longing. For the young Chiss, she had been his best link to the larger Jedi order he'd so hoped to be a part of. Her mere presence had been a sign of comfort, of solidity; now that she was gone he was left to face all the questions and doubt he'd been able to hide away.

Jodram had understood that without Wharn ever having to tell him. At first the Chiss boy had gotten on his nerves; because he was stiff and stuck-up, because he refused to be impressed by Jodram's Jedi skills, because he pressed himself too hard and took it out on others when he failed; because he too wanted to be close to Jade. Yet he was also wracked by doubt, and the guilt he felt over Master Mjalu's death of Varadan had bowed his spirits like a lodestone. It was during those weeks on Ossus that Jodram came to another realization: that he considered Wharn a friend. For all their differences, they were in the same boat.

He remembered one time specifically; they'd been practicing sparring under the watchful eyes of Master Lowbacca and had allowed all their pent-up frustration to boil over. They'd battered each other nearly off the practice mat a dozen times over and worked themselves into a panting sweat before Lowbacca raised a furry arm and called the match a draw.

By then day had turned to evening. Jodram and Wharn had wandered away from the Temple into the rocky barren hills. They'd tried very hard to meditate and touch the great cosmic flow of the Force beneath all those stars, as they'd used to do with Jade.

After a long time of silence a cool wind had passed between them and Wharn had said, "It will never happen again. I won't let it."

"What?" Jodram had asked.

"What happened to Master Mjalu. The way she died, because *I* failed."

It was the first time he'd admitted the guilt he clearly felt aloud, at least to Jodram. "She died because she was fighting a Sith Lord. It's not your fault."

"I got captured. She died saving me. I can't forget that."

"It's not your fault," Jodram had repeated, knowing it wouldn't do any good.

"Next time I'll be better. Stronger. When we face the Sith again I won't fail."

As he said it he'd seemed so much older than his teenage years implied. Not in the stiff, mildly pompous, very Chiss manner he

usually had. He'd sounded beaten, tired, bitter. But above all that, determined.

And then the next time had come and Wharn had plunged into a black pit and died with the Barabel Sith Lord who'd sheared off Jodram's arm. That was what Jodram had thought for many years. Then, suddenly, he'd found himself staring into a familiar blue face and red eyes and he'd realized he'd gotten it all wrong.

After his first conversation with the one who called himself Darth Terrid, Jodram had another realization. He'd been right the first time. The Wharn who'd been his friend was dead.

There were still hints. That was the disconcerting part. The way he tilted his head sometimes; the downward inflection on his voice. The angry scowl that settled over his face as he leaned close to the Jedi captive he'd shackled arms and wrists to a bulkhead in the small storage room of the Erath shuttle they'd commandeered.

"You know the identity of the creature we were fighting in the mess hall," the Chiss said. He stood two meters apart from Jodram. Hands were clasped at the small of his stiff back. His eyes were narrowed in concentration but Jodram couldn't feel anyone prying into his mind with the Force.

"I have a guess," Jodram said.

"And you why the Erath all abandoned ship at once?"

"Another guess."

"The creature. Is it *dead*?"

He didn't know how far this half-familiar Chiss would push. He knew he didn't want to find out. "Probably not," he said. "Defeated. But not gone."

"Does it have a *name*?"

He felt it then; tendrils of thought touching his mind, feeling for the truth in his thoughts. Faint stabs of pain jutted into his mind; he winced and said, "You don't need to karking do that."

"Do I?" The Chiss tilted his head in curiosity, so Wharn-like.

"It's *Abeloth*. You've heard of her, right?"

He saw Darth Terrid's eyes widened; his small Force attacks immediately disappeared, like he'd actually been taken by surprise.

"You remember, don't you?" Jodram couldn't keep himself from asking. "They told us about her at the Jedi Academy. Ben Skywalker fought her. So did Master Solo Fel. You *do* remember."

The narrow eyes came back, the scowl. It was the first either of them had intimated aloud what they both clearly understood.

"That was another life," Terrid said, "But I do remember."

"And now we're on this Erath shuttle. What are you hoping, they'll lead you back to her? Well, they're probably not going home. Jedi have already been to their planet. It's a plague-stricken wasteland. *Abeloth* did it. She ruined the whole planet when they wouldn't worship her."

"We will find Abeloth. And we will destroy her."

"Sounds like a plan. Think you can count me in?"

"Is that a serious request?"

There was only one alternative and they both knew it. "I'd rather die fighting her than die here."

"I'll keep that in mind." Darth Terrid turned for the door.

"Hey, wait!" Jodram called. "What are you going to do now? Go talk to your boss, your *Sith* boss? I thought your kind was supposed to be masters of your own fates."

Terrid glanced back without turning. "You know nothing of the Sith."

"I know the Sith killed my first Master. And I had a friend who blamed himself over it, really bad, and swore he'd do everything he could to hurt the Sith after that."

"He was just a boy. He didn't understand."

"*What* didn't he understand? What could make him join sides with the people he hated more than anything?"

Terrid kept staring like he was coming up with some answer for that question. Then he walked straight out the door without a word, leaving Jodram to hang captive on the wall.

It was disappointing; he'd genuinely wanted to know. All he could do now was guess, and ponder, and wait for when his former friend decided to kill him.

It really might have been the will of the Force. When Darth Terrid had pinned the captive Jedi to the deck of the ascending escape shuttle he'd looked into that familiar face- narrowed by time but still with the same blue eyes and bright hair- it had felt like the most impossible of coincidences. But perhaps it was more.

The Jedi were the ones who talked about the Force moving events of its own will. To the Sith the individual's will was all that mattered; the Force was the thing from which they wrenched their power. But for him to encounter Jodram Tainer here, in this way, after so many years, made him wonder if it was the Force's will that he meet Jade again too.

The prospect frightened him. That was the only word for it. His return to his part of the galaxy, his encounters with other Chiss, hadn't moved Darth Terrid at all, but this was different. Jodram Tainer threatened to bring back shades of Ran'wharn'csapla he'd thought long murdered. Terrid knew he should kill the Jedi right now, while he was defenseless. It would be the simplest, easiest thing.

But not yet. There was still more to learn and Jodram had been surprisingly forthcoming so far. *Abeloth*. He remembered the stories from his Jedi apprentice days; he'd frankly thought them legends or at least exaggerations, no matter how much old Jaina Solo Fel had insisted otherwise. The Sith did not speak of that Force abomination often, but he knew Lord Krayt had once battled it, and that it had used and mostly wiped out Darth Avanc's Lost Tribe of the Sith.

Avanc had clearly been stunned and appalled to see it returned. The Jedi seemed to know more. He'd have to pry that information out of Jodram; it bought the Jedi a little more time alive.

He had no desire to go back in the storage room with the Jedi for any reason. He marched down the shuttle's short corridor to the cockpit, where Serissa Lohr was waiting. Three Erath remained in their seats, operating the piloting consoles. When Terrid had stormed the shuttle, killing all who tried to fight back and disarming those who didn't, he'd managed to corner a few crewmen who'd understood snippets of Cheunh. His instructions had been

simple: Keep flying to wherever you are going. Do not contact any of the other shuttles.

They were too frightened to do anything else, especially with Serissa constantly looking over their shoulders. The rest of the captive Erath were bound and locked in the main cargo hold; those who'd died fighting had been expelled through an airlock. Once the living outlived their usefulness, the captives would join the dead.

Serissa's face was full of questions but Terrid asked his first. "Have you found how to work their communications device?"

"I think so. Are you ready to try calling *Intruder*?"

"Of course." The Erath pilots were watching with the edges of their multi-faceted eyes but Terrid didn't care; none of them understood Basic.

As he moved toward what Serissa marked as the comm console, the young woman asked, "Did you kill the Jedi?"

"Not yet. He needs to be questioned further."

"Does he know what the thing we saw on the ship was?"

"He does."

"I don't suppose we've seen the last of it."

"How do you know what?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Otherwise we wouldn't be on this ship, chasing who-knows-what."

"I'll explain in a minute, or perhaps Darth Avanc will be gracious enough to do it first. Did you input *Intruder's* comm code?"

"I entered what you told me to. Are we ready?"

"We are," he said, and tapped the button.

Whatever technology the Erath used was at least partially compatible with *Intruder's*; no holo-image appeared in the cockpit but Darth Avanc's deep familiar voice said, "Speak, Lord Terrid."

"We've commandeered a ship. We're en route to our destination... wherever that is."

"Excellent. I don't suppose you've learned any more about the place."

"No. I did not." He should have mentioned the Jedi but hesitated. He said instead, "I need to know what to expect. What enemy we're facing."

Avanc's deep breath crackled over the comm. "You've been told of Abeloth."

"I have."

"Then you already know the nature of the enemy."

"I don't," Serissa interjected. "What is this... Abeloth?"

"I think you'd best explain," he told Avanc.

"Abeloth is a very ancient, very powerful entity. Her spirit can infest multiple bodies and she craves power and praise above all things. She *feeds* on fear. I can only imagine that she was the heart of this raider group. When the Jedi killed her bodies aboard the flagship, the raider fleet broke apart."

Serissa scowled. "Then why are we on this ship?"

"Because this race, the Erath, lie at the heart of it," said Terrid. "The rest of the raiders might scatter back to where they came from, but if anyone can lead us back to Abeloth, it's them."

"And *why* are we chasing Abeloth if she's an ancient unkillable monstrosity?"

"Sith do not run from threats," said Terrid. "We face them and defeat them."

"Are Sith also suicidal? You saw that monster on the flagship as well as I did."

Avanc's dry chuckle sounded on the comm. "I have been in contact with Sheddu Maad. More Sith are on the way to help track and kill Abeloth. You, Darth Terrid, are to follow where clues lead you, but you will not engage Abeloth by yourself."

Serissa snorted. "I should hope not."

"When you reach your destination, relay it to us on *Intruder* and we will join you," Avanc continued.

"I understand," said Terrid.

"There's one more thing, Darth Avanc," Serissa interjected. "You should know, when we escaped the flagship we captured a Jedi on the way out."

Terrid felt a spike of anger toward her but restrained it. He should have told Avanc that from the start. The Keshiri asked, "What have you done with it?"

"I've begun interrogations," said Terrid. "The Jedi, too, are hunting Abeloth."

"Is it still alive?"

"I'll interrogate him further and learn all the Jedi know."

"Good. Break him fully but do not kill him."

"You want me to keep him alive?"

"Yes. That will not be difficult, will it?"

"Of course not," said Terrid, wondering the reasons. Perhaps Avanc didn't trust him to learn the full truth, or to tell everything. He hadn't wanted to kill the Jedi but should have. This reprieve was no relief. "Is that all?"

"For now. Until later, Lord Terrid."

The line clicked off. Terrid looked away from the console to see Serissa regarding him thoughtfully. He tried to sense her mind in the Force but found it hard to read. She'd been learning how to guard herself.

"You *were* going to tell Avanc about the Jedi, weren't you?" she asked.

"Of course. Did you think I wasn't?"

"I'm not sure." Her brows drew together. "Darth Avanc said you used to be a Jedi yourself."

"Another life." It was what he'd just told Jodram.

"I don't suppose you know this Jedi."

A lucky guess, or good perception. He suspected the latter and decided not to lie. "I remember him."

"And he remembers you?"

"Yes."

"I see. Do you want me to interrogate him?" She was full of surprises.

"I will do it myself."

"I can do it. I'm offering." Honesty bled through in the Force; she meant what she said. She wanted to do it, to prove to her new masters that she could.

"I will break the Jedi. You will watch the prisoners and make sure they do nothing untoward."

Disappointment softened her expression. "If that's the way you wish it."

"I'm your Master. You are my apprentice. You will do as you're told, apprentice."

"Of course," she nodded stiffly.

"Then stay here. And leave the rest to me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Damien Corde had done a wide variety of jobs in the Empire's service; the most recent had spanned the spectrum from courier to orchestrator of two bloody battles. Playing bodyguard seemed more like the former, and once again Moff Veers had refrained from explaining exactly what this innocuous, apparently-simple task was meant to accomplish.

He'd been secreted onto the security team of Admiral Hallis, commanding officer of the Imperial First Fleet, just four days before. He'd slept in the barracks aboard the admiral's star destroyer *Sentinel*, eaten in the mess with the other guards, and swapped stories about previous assignments which were, in his case, entirely fictional. That he had seven years on the next-oldest bodyguard went uncommented upon, but it was, to him, the one potentially jarring aspect of what was otherwise a smooth and simple insertion.

Four days after joining the team he accompanied the admiral onto his shuttle and flew out from *Sentinel* to meet the new arrival from Kuat. Veers had simply told him to protect Hallis at all costs, and nothing more. Whatever was possibly going to happen to him, Damien had a feeling it would occur soon, when the admiral boarded the new super star destroyer *Invincible*.

Damien had seen schematics of the ship but never appreciated its size until he saw it in person. At fourteen kilometers long it was more than seven times the length of the twin *Predator*-class destroyers that hung off its flanks. The ship was long and narrow, more sword than dagger, with superstructure slanting wide of the engine sections like a hilt-guard.

He knew he shouldn't gawk but the other guards were staring out the shuttle's porthole windows too, as entranced by this massive ship as he was. The Empire had made larger warships in its glory days- Darth Vader's *Executor* and Palpatine's black-hulled *Eclipse* came to mind- but it had been almost a century since it had commissioned a warship this mighty. During its decades as the galaxy's foremost power, the Alliance had constructed a few giant warships, mostly from the Mon Calamari shipyards, but during the Long Peace they'd quietly retired their great weapons and focused on smaller ships and smaller fleets. *Invincible* was a statement of Imperial supremacy and Imperial pride, the kind not seen for generations. To be one of the first to see it was an honor that made the rest of this strange mission worthwhile.

Admiral Hallis seemed to be the only unimpressed one; that or he hid it well. The most senior of the Empire's four fleet admirals, a thickset and craggy-faced man with a head of white hair under the cap of his formal dress uniform. Damien knew him only by reputation; more administrator than soldier, more concerned with efficiency than inspiring his troops. He frankly didn't seem like the kind of officer Veers would have courted as an ally, but as always, Damien's job was to follow orders, not ask questions.

Invincible had been orbiting Bastion for two hours when Hallis arrived to take his position as flag officer for the Empire's greatest warship. Damien understood the ship was still only operating on a skeleton crew; the bulk of its staff would be imported from other ships, mostly the First Fleet, in the days to come. The goal today was the show the thing off, which was why Damien wasn't surprised to find a squawking flock of journalists in the landing bay when their shuttle sent down. They were barely held back by a stormtrooper-guarded cordon and they put Damien on edge,

though he was careful not to show it. He made slow and steady movements, watched everything, and kept a hand near his hip-mounted pistol but not on it.

As they escorted an equally stern-faced Hallis toward the hangar exit, the admiral made the signal to halt and turned to face the journalists. They immediately barraged him with questions and shoved audio receivers at him, though Damien and the other security staff made sure they were all at least two meters from the admiral. He scanned the crowd for anything that could be used as a ranged weapon but saw only equipment brandished with a variety of news-net logos, from INN to the smaller independent Imperial networks and even a few Alliance-based ones. *Invincible* was a big deal indeed.

"A question, Admiral!" one woman shouted louder than the others. "Will this ship be put into use against the raiders right away?"

"Are the raiders defeated, Admiral?" asked another reporter.

A third threw in, "Admiral, is it true the leader of the raiders was killed by a Jedi?"

Hallis' face creased a little more as he gave them a small, polite smile. "After the engagement at Sevok-358 we can say with confidence we've dealt the raiders a crippling blow. *Invincible* will be taken out to the border regions to secure our systems there."

"Is their leader *dead*?" the third reporter, from an Alliance network, pressed. "Did a Jedi kill him?"

The flock quieted a little; they all wanted to hear it. Hallis allowed a tiny nod. "He is dead. Our Imperial knights were responsible for the kill."

That brought up another swarm of questions. The loudest one shouted, "Admiral, if the threat is over how do you justify *Invincible*? Couldn't the money and material for this ship had been better spent?"

That one was from an Imperial network, Damien saw, one of the little independent ones. Hallis' smile flattened and he said, "I am fully in agreement with Head of State Avaris and Supreme Commander Darakon that this warship is essential for the future

security of the Empire. The recent attacks prove we need to be strong and vigilant at all times. If you'll excuse me, I have to review operations on my ship. The Head of State and Supreme Commander will arrive in a few hours and will answer all your remaining questions at the press conference. Thank you."

With that he turned and walked fast for the exit. Damien and the other guards had to hurry to keep up. Once he was past all the journalists, into the quiet security of the hallways, the stiff old admiral allowed a small sigh.

"You did well in there, sir," Damien offered.

Hallis glanced sideways, like he was noticing Damien for the first time. Damien thought he was in for a reprimand- the admiral was a reputed martinet- but he said, "I threw them a bone to gnaw on. Avaris will handle all the hard questions."

"Yes, sir," Damien said, and decided not to risk further conversation.

Hallis wasn't in the mood for it. He walked briskly on, and Damien followed, wondering again just what the hell was doing here.

Darth Kroan never forgot a face, even a vermin's, so when he watched the news-casts from Bastion in the comfort of his landside estate on Kuat he recognized one of Admiral Hallis' security officers as the agent Moff Veers had sent to pick up *Invincible's* command keys. What that meant he wasn't sure; most likely Veers was just being cautious. He didn't know exactly how or when Kroan would strike at Head of State Avaris but he'd apparently decided Admiral Hallis needed to be protected.

A smart precaution, but unnecessary. The plan Kroan had put in motion wasn't anything that threatened Hallis or anyone else on *Invincible*. An extra bodyguard wouldn't provide protection anyway.

Avaris and Darakon were still on Bastion, no doubt running through their own rigorous security checks before getting on the shuttle that would take them up to the super star destroyer, checks that would be just as useless. They wouldn't arrive for a few hours more so Kroan went to work in the meantime.

The One Sith were seeking out Force-sensitives in positions of power because that was what the old Sith had done when undermining the Republic from within. Darth Sidious had been of a noble family, albeit from a backwater planet. Plagueis had been even richer than Kroan. At the same time, Darth Wyyrlok and the others hid in the Hapes cluster, raising a born-Sith army that would rival the Jedi Order's once they brought it out of the shadows. It was a two-pronged attack, combing the methods of Darth Bane's followers and the Sith-led armies like Naga Sadow's and Valkorion's. It was, he thought, a merging of both sides' strengths, and the best way to bring down the Jedi and the Alliance.

Still, it meant that for converts like Kroan, he was forced to spend more time living his false life than acting as a true Sith. Managing the galaxy's greatest shipbuilding conglomerate was enough to devour every hour of every day, even with the help of droids, aides, and competent sub-managers. Tomorrow he was due to meet with the rest of the Board and review a contract proposal with a new distribution company; hardly the kind of intrigue commonly associated with the Sith.

The one potentially useful thing about the proposal was its source: Chance Calrissian, along with the old Hutt he's partnered corporate interests with. Back when Kroan had been KDY's newest board member he'd spent most of his time on Coruscant, winning favors from senators and businessbeings with a combination of charisma and careful bribes. Consorting nonstop with vermin grew tiresome, but Calrissian had been more entertaining than most, and had a close friendship with an important Jedi that Kroan had hoped might prove useful.

But that had been a long time ago. He barely spoke with Calrissian anymore. Still, tomorrow he'd ply the man with drinks and compliments, talk nostalgia, and ask with well-feigned casualness what Calrissian's Jedi friend was doing nowadays. It just might get him something useful.

He'd reviewed the advance copy of Calrissian and Volgma's proposal and made notes for the other Board members when he checked the INN broadcast. His timing was good; the pretty young

female reporter was saying that the Head of State and Supreme Commander were leaving Ravelin in their shuttle and would reach *Invincible* in minutes.

Kroan sat on the sofa in front of the holo and leaned forward to watch intently. This was the crux of it; he was confident the plan he'd put in motion would succeed but there was still the chance something could go wrong, especially when most of it was in the hands of vermin.

As the reported kept talking, an insert image over her shoulder showed a long-range shot of a single white Imperial shuttle clearing Bastion's atmosphere, flanked on either side by two red-painted TIE-X fighters that normally flew honor guard for the Head of State. Suddenly the view jerked wildly; the camera zoomed out just as two of the TIE-Xs burst into flame and the other two broke formation and began firing. The reporter, caught as off-guard as her viewers, watching with them in stunned silence as the camera caught a long-bodied Kaleesh frigate falling out of space toward the Head of State's shuttle.

It was exactly as planned. Locating the *Grievous* had been difficult after it had fled Kalee. Darth Wyyrlok had sent a dozen of the One Sith's best trackers to find the fugitive warship, and once they had it had been no easy task convincing the frightened and angry Kaleesh leaders to take the bait, but in the end the chance to strike back against the leaders of the Empire that had subjugated their world twice over was too strong.

Kroan smiled to himself as the *Grievous* blasted the remaining TIE-Xs away and grabbed the shuttle with its tractor beam. The Kaleesh were consistently defiant against outsider rule, but their bellicose pride was what made the aliens easy to manipulate. Over a century ago, Darth Sidious had made their best general into his most useful pawn. The fact that Kroan's tool today was named after Sidious' was one delicious irony; that the Jedi had enabled it was another.

The space around the *Grievous* immediately swarmed with other ships from Bastion's orbital security: gunships, patrolling TIEs, an attack frigate. None of them dared fire when the Kaleesh

ship had reeled Avaris and Darakon's shuttle inside its shield envelope and clasped it tight to the hull.

The INN reported was, finally, fumbling to respond to the situation. "As you can see, the Kaleesh ship had just seized the Head of State's shuttle! This is... an incredible development! The ship... hold on...." She pressed a finger to her earpiece, carefully obscured by a curtain of long hair. "Yes, our sources are confirming this *is* the same ship that escaped the security operation at Kalee two weeks ago. This ship is, ah, the *Grievous* and when last spotted in contained the leaders of the anti-Imperial uprising on Kalee, the leaders who'd aligned with the alien invaders.

"One moment, please... We're getting a broadcast on all frequencies from the *Grievous*. We are... Are we receiving? Can we put it on? Yes, we *can* put it on.... One moment-"

Then there was a short static-burst and the woman disappeared. She was replaced with the full-screen head-shot of a Kaleesh warrior, face obscured by the white tribal masks his race wore. The angry eyes, vertical slit-eyes like a predator's, glared through the mask at an audience of billions.

"You can see we have captured your leaders," the alien said with a voice as fierce as his eyes. "We have now done to you what you have done to us! We will hold your leaders. They are *ours* for as long as your troops occupy Kalee!

"We invoke our dead! We invoke the great Grievous who died in a holy war against your Palpatine! We will honor our martyrs and win independence for our race! We will not release your leaders until every Imperial soldier has been removed from our world! Until then we will-"

The transmission burst to static. The reporter reappeared, and over her shoulder the inset-image showed the *Grievous* explode in burst of light and heat so powerful the nearby TIEs and gunships pulled back to escape the blast. The One Sith's saboteurs had done their job well; the explosion of the frigate's power core had wiped out every last warrior aboard the *Grievous* and everyone aboard the Head of State's shuttle.

The Kaleesh had been reticent to trust the mysterious strangers who'd offered them help. They'd been right to suspect the Sith and wrong to take the bait that was too good to refuse. It was how the Sith operated time and again and it rarely failed.

The reporter's pretty face had gone blank with shock. After ten or fifteen seconds she finally remembered she was on air, looked at the camera, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen... We have just witnessed the murder of Head of State Avaris. And.... Yes, my sources say the Supreme Commander Darakon was on the shuttle with her. I repeat, Avaris and Darakon are *dead*. That means the Moff Council will have to elect an emergency Head of State until a general election can be held. We've no word yet from the military how-

Kroan shut off the transmission. Everything had worked perfectly and everything would flow from here. Humming pleasantly to himself he got up from the sofa, poured a cup of aged Sartinyanian brandy given to him by Moff Veers- it seemed appropriate- and went back to Calrissian's proposal.

Davek had excused himself from watching *Invincible's* commissioning ceremony. A lot of officers were eager to see the super star destroyer officially put into action but he'd claimed he had too much to do overseeing repairs to the Fourth, which was true enough, but he was also trying hard not to think about that waste-of-credits vanity project that hadn't been ready when they most needed it.

Vice Admiral Devlin Jaeger, chief of operations at the Bilbringi shipyards and Davek's former helm chief on *Voidwalker*, was of the same mind, so the two of them ensconced themselves in Jaeger's office and started going over reports before Avaris was due to start her press conference. They were, therefore, caught completely off-guard when Jaeger's aide buzzed his way into the office and asked edgily, "Admirals, do you have any response to what's happened on Bastion? People are expecting a statement."

Davek and Jaeger both fixed the young Zabrak with confused stares. The aide stared back. "Haven't you heard? INN, the other news-nets, the Alliance ones, it's everywhere!"

Jaeger slapped the controls to the holo-projector mounted in the wall of his office. As it winked on the aide started speaking over the female INN reporter, saying, "It happened so *fast*! We still don't know how that Kaleesh ship got so deep into our security lanes without being caught."

"What ship? Is it-" Davek stopped. His eyes locked on the text scrawling beneath the reporter: Moff Council meeting to elect emergency HoS – Alliance CoS Esch expresses formal condolences – Reports of Third Fleet action at Kalee unconfirmed.

"It was the *Grievous*," the aide said. "It came out of nowhere. Avaris and Darakon never had a chance."

"They're *dead*?"

"Yes, sir." The aide waved weakly at the holo. "The Moff Council, like they said, is having an emergency vote right now."

Davek's head swam with too many possibilities, none of them good. He remembered that a new moff had just been voted to replace Moff Moran from Valc VII; a hardliner and old-style Imperial. That might be enough to tip the scales. He tried to run through all the moffs on the Council and their political leanings but there was so much else to consider too: who would lead the military now that Darakon was dead, what would happen to the Kaleesh, what would happen to other non-humans in the Empire. More anti-alien riots were a certainty; the only question was how bad they'd be.

Another thought reared up: if Arlen had fired on the *Grievous* back at Kalee, like Davek had ordered him too, this disaster never would have happened.

"Admiral," Jaeger said, lightly slapping his shoulder. "Listen."

Davek refocused his attention on the INN reporter. She said, "Our sources have just confirmed that the Moff Council has completed its vote. We, ah, don't have confirmation of the winner yet but we understand there will be an official statement in minutes."

"Not good," Davek breathed.

"What I want to know is, who's going to be Supreme Commander?" asked Jaeger. "It has to be one of the fleet admirals, and you're, ah-"

"Too young. So's Grave."

"Hallis, then?"

"Probably." Davek wished he knew the First's commander better. He had a reputation as being more boring old bureaucrat than soldier, and they said he kept his political leanings to himself.

The aide, standing behind them, coughed to get attention. "Sirs, the whole 'Yards are in an uproar. I *really* think they need a statement of some kind, probably from the both of you."

"They'll get it in a minute, Lieutenant," Jaeger snapped. "You're excused."

Davek barely noticed the Zabrak salute and scamper off. He and Jaeger watched the holo, grimly captivated, as the reported repeated what she'd probably been saying for the past hour: they had no idea where the *Grievous* had come from or how it had slipped so deep into the capital world's security net. She mentioned something about the wreckage being so gnarled it might take days or weeks to identify bodies, but flight control on Ravel could confirm that yes, Avaris and Darakon had been aboard the shuttle.

Heaviness settled in Davek's stomach. He's respected Darakon, one soldier to another. As for Avaris, he'd never *liked* her, personally or politically, but now that she was dead he felt the sudden conviction that he'd misjudged her all this time, or at least failed to give her credit when it was due. What would follow her was likely to be much worse.

Then the reporter said, "We'll be cutting away in a moment. We'll be giving you an official transmission from the Moff Council, which I'm told is casting out from Yaga Minor."

There it was, then. The reporter was replaced by a big INN logo and the logo was replaced by a shot of an empty podium with a round Imperial crest on the wall behind it. Even before he stepped into view, Davek knew it would be Corrien Veers who took the stage.

Dressed in his martial olive-green moff's uniform, Veers gripped both sides of the podium and looked right at his audience. Gone was the chatty, personable, rumor-spreader who'd been giving all those INN interview lately. Veers looked grim and grieving, shoulder slightly hunched as though he was weighted down by the responsibility that had been thrust upon him.

"It's with great grief that I come before you today," Veers told his billions. "The emergency session of the Moff Council has elected me as Head of State of the Empire. I did not want this position. I did not seek it. But I will honor it with every breath I take.

"Before I go further I want to say a few words for the dead. Supreme Commander Darakon was as honorable a soldier as I've ever known. He devoted his life to serving the citizens of the Empire and he was respected by every man and woman who served under him. Replacing him is impossible, but I know the most valiant efforts will be made by Brayton Hallis, former commander of the First Fleet and our most senior admiral, now Supreme Commander of the Imperial Armed Forces."

Davek immediately wondered who'd replace Hallis as commander of the First. He didn't know any of Hallis' vice admirals well. Then he wondered what Veers had planned for Admiral Grave, his protégé.

"Now let me speak to Head of State Avaris," Veers went on. "Just like Darakon, she gave everything she had for the Empire, including her life. I knew her since our days on the Moff Council together and though we didn't always disagree I never doubted her integrity and her devotion to safeguarding the lives of the Empire's citizens. Her ruthless murder is a tragedy for us all, and I promise all loyal citizens of the Empire that her death will be avenged.

"Some day soon, we will hold a general election so that all Imperial citizens can decide the Head of State. Until that day comes I promise I will use every effort to root out traitors to the Empire. Any being still alive who contributed to the murder of Neela Avaris will be found and punished. Anyone working to undermine the Empire from within- regardless of species, priorities, or professed

loyalties- will be found and punished. I swear this on my life, and the lives of all the fine Imperials who died this day.

"Once the enemies of the Empire have been rooted out, once I have determined- along with Admiral Hallis, the Moff Council, and all our other intelligence and military leaders- that we have conquered the threat to our way of life, I will stand down and call elections. But until that day I will shoulder the burden put upon me. I will fight every hour of every day to rid the Empire of its enemies outside *and* within. And I have faith that you, my fellow Imperial citizens, will fight alongside me until we've made a better, safer Empire for us all.

"Good day, and thank you for listening."

As the broadcast switched back to the INN reported, Jaeger turned it off. He and Davek slumped in their seats for a long moment, stunned.

Jaeger asked, "When do you think he'll announce a general election? Months? Years?"

"Ever?" Davek rasped.

Jaeger scowled, shook his head, and said nothing. Davek thought on his father, all Jagged had done over the course of his life to remake this Empire without an emperor into a just society for all. Davek tried to tell himself that the institutions his father had made were strong, that they could endure whatever Veers and his allies would do to wreck it in the name of security.

He wanted to believe Jagged Fel hadn't lived and died in vain; he wanted it more than anything, even to see his father alive again. But sitting there in Jaeger's office, Veer's stern words and serious eyes echoing in his mind, he knew that he could not.

The *Grievous* incident, alternately described as an assassination or attack, had occurred at noon Imperial Standard Time, which meant that the Fourth Fleet crew and shipyard staff at Bilbringi had the rest of the day to let the ramifications wash over them in waves. First had been shock, then indignation, then anger. Something strange had happened when Corrien Veers gave his first speech as emergency Head of State. Something had settled over everyone; not

relief or calm or satisfaction but something, a certain steadiness that comes with at least knowing somebody is in charge and working to set things right. Trust might have been the closest word for it.

Through it all Lukas Briggs felt strangely detached, and it wasn't until evening, when the other shipyards staff started retreating to the habitat section, that he began to understand why. After the battle at Sevok-358 everyone had shared collective relief that the raiders seemed defeated and the hope that the Empire might feel safe and secure again. The attack at Bilbringi had shattered it all and most people, Lukas included, were reeling from the whiplash of it all.

The one exception, the one person he knew who *hadn't* acted relieved after Sevok-358, was his old sergeant.

Lukas only realized it late in the evening. He hadn't talked to Malkin all day; he'd spent the whole afternoon trying to push through assigned work while listening to his subordinates in the quartermaster's office swap gossip and opinions. He didn't know where the colonel was now and decided not to call him.

Instead, for reasons he still couldn't quite explain, he went down to the storage chambers to have a look. It was a maze of industrial-size cargo crates down there but eventually, with the help of a small floating archivist droid, he found the location of the supplies he'd helped Malkin and Marsh slip aboard the station last month.

As deputy chief quartermaster he had the authority to manually open and inspect just about anything. He was surprised, then, when the computerized latch on the crates refused to open for his identicard.

"Who has authority to open these crates?" Lukas asked the droid hovering over his shoulder.

"Colonel Homs Malkin, Infantry Division, 221st Regiment."

"Anyone *else*?"

"No, sir."

"What about the Chief Quartermaster?"

"No, sir."

"What about Vice Admiral Jaeger?"

"No, sir."

He sighed. "What about Emperor Palpatine?"

The droid's one eyes winked off and on. "Not applicable. Please restate your query."

Lukas scowled and ran his hand over the locking mechanism. It was a heavy-duty thing but he could break it open if he had the right tools; an industrial laser-saw or a Jedi's lightsaber. There'd be no way to hide that damage and he had no obvious cause to break into the crate. The weird security protocol might have been a glitch; these things had been transferred all the way from Yaga Minor after all, and thanks to Lukas' own efforts they hadn't gone through the proper accession process. It was thoroughly possible that these things contained exactly what Malkin claimed they had.

But the nagging feeling wouldn't go away. He retreated to his office; the quartermasters' section had mostly cleared of staff and he sat down at his computer and brought up personnel records. His rank and division gave him only limited access to information from Infantry Division. He could get a roster of names of the soldiers who'd come to Bilbringi from Yaga Minor along with those crates, but he couldn't get into their service records.

He knew people in Infantry Division who ranked high enough they should have access to those files. It would take a little thought but he could probably come up with a very rational-sounding explanation as to why he'd need a peek at the personnel records for the 221st Regiment. He didn't know what he'd find, but he felt the need to check.

He didn't do anything that night. Most everyone had gone back to their quarters, which was where Lukas needed to be. When he got back to the habitat section Marian was still up; she embraced him and commented, "Late working?"

Usually she said it with a sarcastic edge; she could smell the ale on his breath. There was none of it this time and her voice was all concern. He squeezed her shoulders and said, "Yeah. It's been a hell of a day."

"I've noticed."

"How are the kids?"

"Asleep."

"That's good. I bet they had questions."

"Leena did. Polaw's worried but he's too afraid to ask."

"I'm sorry. I should have been here tonight."

"You had work." She squeezed his arm. "It's been a hell of a day, like you said."

"Yeah. And I need to be out early tomorrow."

"I thought so."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm tired. Let's get some rest."

He washed, changed clothes, joined his wife in the bedroom. There were too many thoughts in his head. When he lay down beside Marian and tried to sleep, he knew it wouldn't happen tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The ride outbound to Broken Moon was a succession of small revelations. Marin Fel knew that her mother and father had met sometime during the Senex-Juvex Crisis. In the course of those events Tamar had made an enemy of *Mand'alor* Gevern Auchs and been forced to seek refuge with the Jedi.

Marin got a lot of clarifications on the way to Broken Moon. She found out that her mother had been part of a team of Mandalorians sent by Auchs- and Darth Xoran, though they hadn't known it at the time- to interdict and possibly killed her father and Chance Calrissian. Things had gone crazy. Another Sith had attacked and tried to kill them both. Tamar found out the same Sith might have killed her sister Nyal.

It was a lot to take in. As they exited hyperspace into the Tolomen system, an apparently-lifeless collection of planetoids and one big gas giant orbited by dozens of small moons, her father dropped the last bits of key information.

"When we were first here we had some help," Arlen said as he gently guided *Starlight Champion* toward around a silver-swirled giant. "We got close to the crime boss, Mordran Krux, with the help of one of his servants, a Twi'lek girl named Sherev'ath."

Marin might have grown up sheltered in the Jedi academy, but she knew the cliché about crime bosses and Twi'lek slave girls. "Okay. What happened?"

"She killed the *shabuir*," Tamar said from the co-pilot's seat.

"Language," Arlen said. "But yes, Sherev'ath killed Krux. And then we lost track of her because things got pretty chaotic. I didn't hear anything about her until I guess... six years back?"

"Seven years ago she showed up again on Broken Moon," Tamar said, "Only this time she was running the place. She's been in charge ever since. Broken Moon keeps a lower profile now than it did under Krux. It's mostly a shadowport, a place for beings to trade all kinds of illicit goods and hold meetings. Shever'ath has her fingers in a lot of things, though she's bigger on selling information than spice."

"And you think she'll help us because you helped her all those years ago?"

"She's thrown a few favors my way since," Arlen said. "Mostly little crumbs of information it's hard to get through Jedi networks."

"She's quite fond of your father," Tamar drawled.

"Last time I checked. Let's hope she still is. Are we getting hailed yet?"

Tamar checked the comm console. "Looks like we've been given a green light. Main hangar complex."

"All right. Let's take her in."

Arlen steered *Champion* toward a dark, rocky moon. As Marin peered over her parents' shoulders she saw that the moon trailed a long chain of slow-moving space-rock as it orbited the gas giant. Maybe a quarter of the sphere's mass seemed to have been ripped away, probably by a comet or asteroid, and it must have been crumbling slowly in the centuries since. It was, indeed, a broken moon, and it felt strange to name your secret base in so obvious a way, but she remembered that the galaxy was gigantic and there were probably thousands of similarly damaged satellites drifting around forgotten planets.

Champion carefully threaded the many tumbling rocks and slipped into the ripped-open section of the moon. She felt her

father tense with concentration as he guided them through a series of rocky, twisting tunnels. *Champion's* forward light-beams sometimes flashed on mechanical things; Marin spotted what looked like sensor packages and a few defensive gun turrets.

When they finally reached the landing zone they set down on a broad pad a kilometer across and occupied by over a dozen ships of all designs, most similar in size to *Champion*. These were smuggler's ships, Marin thought; the vessels of outlaws and spice-runners the likes of which rarely ventured into Imperial Space's law-and-order and never to Bastion itself.

This was a very different world than what she'd known and her heart pounded fast as she followed her parents out of the ship. She felt exhilarated and ultra-paranoid at once as she scanned a flight deck that was mostly empty of people. All three of them wore loose civilian clothes; her mother had brought her full *beskar'gam* suit along just in case but kept it aboard *Champion* for now. Tamar kept a blaster pistol clearly visible at her hip while her father had his lightsaber in a secure spot on his jacket. Marin had brought her saber along as well, but her parents had both insisted she leave it aboard the ship. It had felt a little demeaning at the time, but now she was glad she didn't have to worry about whether she'd have to use the half-familiar weapon in a situation of real danger.

As they walked across the deck Tamar casually flicked a finger at one ship. "There it is. *Harm's Way*."

Marin had heard it; it belonged to her mother's cousin Dorn. It was an unusual ship, not as strange-looking as *Starlight Champion* but still different from the usual disc-shaped Corellian freighters or boxy Imperial haulers.

"Mandalorian ship?" Marin asked in a low voice.

"More or less. Variation on the old Kuati *Firespray*-type patrol ship. Dorn's made plenty of customizations."

"Can you call him now?" asked Arlen.

"One way to find out." Tamar pulled a personal comlink out of her jacket and flicked it on. She said something fast and soft Marin couldn't catch, but it sounded like *Mando'a*. A tinny voice

responded, even harder to hear. Tamar pocketed the link and said, "They're in the main audience room. *She's* there too."

"Then let's get this over with," Arlen said.

Marin followed her parents out of the hangar, through a long series of winding corridors carved through rock. A group of Yuzzem, each three times bigger than Marin and encased in thick armor, shoved past them, roaring and barking things she couldn't understand. They passed an open door and Marin got a glimpse of a smoky room; broad-bodied aliens she couldn't place were reclining on lounges and what looked like a couple of Togruta girls were writhing in front of them, bare skin gleaming under red lights.

"Eyes ahead," Arlen said with a nudge in the Force.

"Right," Marin swallowed. She could feel more from her father in the Force, unspoken but clear. He was telling her, *you don't belong in a place like this*.

She definitely wasn't going to disagree. She kept a little closer behind her parents as they kept moving through the halls. Though wound around a couple of armored, rough-looking Nikto arguing in the middle of an intersection, then stepped into a large chamber with a broad, high dome carved from the rock. Blue and green lights cast across the dome and reflected down on the circular stage in the middle of the room where a couple of muscular, pink-skinned Zeltron men were doing acrobatics Marin was used to seeing from Jedi and nobody else.

Not that their display was Jedi-like. The poses were definitely not Jedi-typical and those Zeltrons had as much on as those Togruta girls she'd glimpsed, which was to say pretty close to nothing.

Her parents lingered on the edge of the chamber and Marin stayed with them. Tamar nudged her arm and did another small pointing gesture. Marin followed her finger and spotted a table with two unapologetically Mandalorian figures in full armor, helmets and all. The bigger one had dark blue plates. The smaller, thinner one had red *beskar* over an off-white body suit.

Dorn and Ninet Skirata, clearly. The red-faced helmet tilted in Marin's direction, a tiny nod.

It was a weird place to meet your family for the first time.

"Well," Marin whispered, "Do we say hello?"

"Not here," Arlen said. He was looking at the dance floor, past it, to the raised dais where a blue-skinned Twi'lek woman sat on a gold-plated throne, one bare leg crossed over the other, watching the show with an expression of faint amusement.

"What do we do now?" Marin asked. "Just... go up to her?"

"She'll take us when she wants to," Tamar said. "*Where* she wants to, which won't be in the open like this."

Marin looked around. There were four different serving stations where humans and aliens of all types clustered, plus other small side tables, some full and other empty.

"Do we take a seat?" She'd never felt more out of place in her life.

"Don't worry," Arlen muttered. "Won't be long."

She gave the room one more anxious look around and suddenly they had company. Anx were tall aliens, hard to miss for their long crested skulls, but somehow this one had sneaked up on them. He sidled beside her father, hands clasped in front of him, and said, "Well, I never thought I'd see the two of you together again. And you've brought a guest."

"Good to see you too." Arlen smiled, plenty of teeth. "How's business?"

"Stable, the way she likes it. I assume you want an audience for the three of you?"

"If it can be arranged."

"I'm sure it can." The Anx gestured to the Zeltron dancers. "Their stamina is impressive, but they'll wear themselves down soon. I'll take you to someplace private."

Marin reached out to both parents in the Force and tried to ask if they could really trust this guy. The best she got was a nudge from a father that meant *stay with me*, which might have been an answer.

They followed the Anx down a new side hall, through a security-locked set of blast doors, and into a surprisingly luxurious chamber with plush sofas, woven carpets, ivory furniture and violet

and red shimmersilk curtains hung over the walls and ceiling that nearly obscured the rock from which the chamber was carved.

"Make yourselves at home," the Anx said dryly. "She'll be with you shortly."

And then he was gone, leaving the three of them alone. Marin looked over the chamber once more and wondered how much all this was worth. Jedi often claimed to be monastic, and indeed they weren't supposed to have much in physical possessions, but their *communal* property at the academies, mostly paid for by donations from private citizens in the Empire and Alliance, was generally clean and well-functioning. This kind of brash display of wealth was another big leap from all she'd known.

"What happens now?" Marin asked. "Do you have a way to signal-"

Her mother tapped two fingers on her forearm, a common Mando signal for silence. Marin shut her mouth. This place was sure to be bugged and her mother didn't want to advertise her connection to Dorn and Ninet out in the main chamber.

They only had to wait a minute more. When the door slid opened Sherev'ath walked into the chamber. Seeing her this close, Marin was caught by surprise. She looked young, closer to Marin's age than her parents', and she was closer to Marin's height too, a full head-and-shoulders shorter than Arlen.

Nonetheless, she walked right up to Marin's father, diaphanous rainbow-colored robes trailing behind her. She smirked, reached up, and fondly stroked Arlen's bearded chin.

"It's been a while, Master Jedi," the Twi'lek smiled.

Arlen didn't return it. "Are you surprised to see me?"

"No. I knew you'd be back one day. What I am surprised by-" she looked at her Tamar, expression darkened. "Is you. I thought you were no longer... attached."

"We're not," said Tamar.

Her gaze swung on Marin. "Then maybe *she's* the reason you're here together."

"This is-"

"Your daughter. Your Jedi daughter." Sherev'ath walked a slow half-circle around Marin. She felt like she was being sized up by a hungry manka cat.

She swallowed hard and said, "Please to meet you. But I'm not a Jedi yet."

The Twi'lek tilted her head and twirled one blue lekku-tip around her finger. "I suppose you've wanted to be one since you were a child."

"That's right."

"Pity. I'm sure with your bloodline you have all kinds of natural talents. Which means you could be anything you want to be."

"I *want* to be a Jedi."

Sherev'ath gave her a look, like she didn't really believe that and didn't think Marin did either, but before she could press the point Arlen said, "We're here for some specific information. We think you can help us."

She looked at Marin's parents. "Mandalorian business or Jedi business?"

"Maybe both," said Tamar.

"If I had to guess, I'd say you were here about Galaset. Correct?"

Arlen did a little bit better at hiding his surprise than Tamar. With a level voice he asked, "Who's Galaset?"

Sherev'ath rolled her eyes. "Auchs's man was here two weeks and five days ago. He didn't stay long."

"Do you keep tight tabs on all your visitors?" Tamar asked.

"Naturally." Sherev'ath sat down at the edge of a sofa, pushed back a hidden panel on the white table beside it, and tapped something into the keypad beneath. A holo-image sprung up in the middle of the room, from some projector Marin couldn't spot. She and her parents circled a life-sized image of a bald, jowl-faced alien and a human male around her parents' age sitting at a small table, maybe one of the ones in the main audience chamber.

Sherev'ath leaned back on the sofa, arms spread lazily across its back. "Galaset's been running 'cargo' through Broken Moon for years now. He does it under a different name, Makempet. A lot of

what he routes is *actual* cargo but he likes to use this place for secret meetings, information-gathering, and the rest."

"Why does he use a fake identity?" asked Marin.

"Because he doesn't want me to know he's Gevern Auch's man," she scowled. "Coming in as Makempet is his way of keeping an eye on me, and using the services I provide without revealing his connections."

"You don't like Mandos then?"

"My... predecessor was close with Auchs. That's reason enough for me not to be." Her pretty blue face resumed its smile when she looked at Arlen. "Thankfully, I had a brave young Jedi Knight to help liberate me. And I won't have it said I don't repay honest debts."

Marin's father shifted uncomfortably. "What else can you tell us about Galaset? Who was he meeting here?"

"That's a good question, and believe me, I've tried to find out."

"Why?"

"Because I like to know things," Sherev'ath shrugged. "And I had a feeling you'd show up."

"Did you *really*?" Tamar asked.

Sherev'ath smiled a hard smile. "It wouldn't be the first time you came crawling to me, begging for dirt you could use against the Mandalore."

Marin felt faint surprise from her father but Tamar said coolly, "You weren't much help those times. Can you be helpful now?"

"To an extent." She trapped the control switch on the table and the holo-image flickered into motion.

The alien leaned in close to the human and started talking. The audio was crackled and the voices a little faint, like ambient noise had been scrubbed away.

"So," the human said, "Do you have a name?"

"Call me Galaset. What should I call you?"

"I think you know already. Starts with Halcyon."

"Ends with Blackmor."

"Fake," Tamar whispered as the human said, "You've been in contact with my employer."

"My employer has," replied Galaset. "I'm just his messenger."

"And how does your employer have an arrangement with this, ah..."

"Her name is Sherev'ath and to her I'm just a being who gets goods from place to place with no problems and no questions."

"That explains something. Frankly, I was expecting someone in different attire."

"I'm still Mandalorian. Even when I'm not fully dressed."

"I was told I'd meet with someone who'd speak with the authority of the Mandalore. Is that you?"

"It is."

"I need to hire your services. I'm very willing to pay the price."

"What kind of services?"

The figures leaned a little closer. "I need a team to hijack several ships, then use them in a combat situation."

"What kind of ships?"

"Medium-sized capital ships. I have all the technical specifications on my person. I'll share them fully with your people."

"What *kind*?"

"Vagaari."

Marin gasped. The alien said, "The target?"

The human said, "The Chiss Ascendancy. Not a major assault, but enough to leave a mark. I'll give you all the information I have. And I will let your people run the mission your way. However, my employer wants me to remain with your people and observe."

Sherev'ath tapped the controls and the holo froze. She said, "I'll give you a copy of the recording if you want, but the rest is haggling over payment. Very tedious. No further clues."

Arlen put his hands on his hips. "Do you bug *all* the conversations in this place?"

She shrugged. "Whenever possible. But frankly I barely bother with most of it. The vast majority of what people have to say isn't worth listening too."

"But you listened to Galaset." Tamar said.

Sherev'ath shot her another hard smile. "You Mandos are more interesting than most. I'll assume those bucket-heads outside are part of *your* clan."

"Then we'll get very far away from here before having a conversation."

The Twi'lek laughed and popped off the couch. She stalked over to Arlen and placed a small datacard in his hand; her fingers lingered on the lines of his palm as she looked up and told him, "A favor to you. If you can pass anything back my way you know I'd appreciate it."

Arlen drew his hand away and pocketed the card. "I'll see what I can. But thank you. This is... This could change everything."

"But you don't have any clue who the human was?" asked Marin. "Not at all?"

Sherev'ath shook her head. "Nothing for certain. Tell me—Marin, isn't it?—who *do* you think he was working for?"

Marin hadn't given the Twi'lek her name and its mention threw her off-balance, but she concentrated on the mental image of that man. Despite his worn spacer's outfit he'd had a stiff posture; square shoulders and a square jaw; short-cropped blond hair like a soldier would wear. Every time she left the Jedi academy and wandered around Ravelin she saw men like that.

"I'm not sure either," Marin said, "But my gut tells me *Imperial*."

Sherev'ath smiled and looked at Arlen. "I like your daughter. I assume you did most of the rearing."

He ignored her comment. "You've given us a lot to think about. Is there anything else?"

"Not for now. But you know when to find me when you need me again."

"That we do." Arlen looked to Tamar and Marin. "I think we're done here."

When they slipped out, leaving Sherev'ath behind, the Anx majordomo was there to guide them through the secure halls back to the main audience chamber.

As they walked Marin whispered to her mother, "She doesn't seem to like you very much."

"Like I think I said, I *did* punch her in the face when we first met."

"From what you told me on the way here, you punched Dad a couple times too."

"Well," Tamar sighed, "You have to admit I'm good at setting the tone."

On their way back to the hangar Arlen saw that Tamar's cousin and his daughter had deserted their spot in the audience chamber. He half-expected to see they'd sneaked aboard *Starlight Champion* but found only a blinking red light on the comm system denoting a message left for him.

Tamar stayed in the vestibule corridor and got on the comm with her cousin, probably nestled in his own ship. Arlen and Marin went into the cockpit and played the recording. He'd been expecting something from his mother or one of the other Jedi, perhaps someone from Ossus, but instead it was a head-and-shoulders shot of his brother.

"I don't know how much you've heard," Davek said, "So I'll say it quickly. Head of State Avaris and Supreme Commander Darakon are dead. They were killed in a surprise attack over Bastion by the Kaleesh ship *Grievous*." His voice darkened at the name.

Arlen's chest tightened. It had been an act of Jedi mercy to let that ship run; his brother had scolded him for it at the time but he'd never imagined it could lead to this.

Davek went on, "The *Grievous* and Avaris' shuttle were both destroyed. Admiral Hallis from the First Fleet has been appointed Supreme Commander. The Moff Council elected Corrien Veers as the new Head of State. He's called on emergency powers and promised to root out all enemy agents inside the Empire before calling a general election."

"Fierfek," Tamar rasped from the cockpit threshold.

"Arlen, we need to be ready for anything," Davek said very seriously. "I don't *think* he'll move against the Jedi. The Order's generally popular now after what you did at Sevok-358. But you know Veers' politics. I'd feel much better if you were in Imperial

Space. There's no telling when Mom and the children might need you. Please respond when you get this message."

The holo disappeared. Arlen fell back in the pilot's chair as thought pinned down by the weight of it all.

In a trembling voice, Marin asked, "What now? Do we go back home?" She'd held her own against Sherev'ath but she looked overwhelmed again. She was worried about her grandmother, about Vitor and Roan.

"Davek's right," Tamar said. "You *should* have back. Take a copy of the recording with you. I'm sure your brother will be interested. I'll go over to Dorn's ship. We can keep chasing leads."

He looked up at her. "You'd do that? Why?"

She shrugged and glanced at the bulkhead. He wanted to think it was because she felt an obligation to uncover the truth and bring justice to the thousands of Chiss killed in a false flag attack. Maybe she just wanted a weapon to use against Auchs. Probably it was a mix of both. After all they'd been through he knew Tamar better than just about anyone, even if he didn't always understand her weird mix of earnest morals and Mandalorian clan pride.

"I'll do it, Jedi," Tamar told him. "So keep a link open. I might have more information for you."

"What about me?" asked Marin, voice still weak. "Where do I go?"

Arlen opened his mouth to tell her to come; then he wasn't sure. There was no telling how things would be when he got back to Bastion. Imperial space was on the exact opposite side of the galaxy from Broken Moon; it would take over a week to get there. Anything could happen in a week and if Veers decided to crack down on the Jedi like Palpatine a century ago, Arlen didn't know if he'd be able to safeguard his daughter, let alone his mother and nephews.

There was also no telling what would happen if she went with Tamar. If they tried to investigate Galaset that could set them in Gevern Auchs' sights, and the Mandalore might decide to put a terminal end to Skirata meddling in his affairs.

That was possible but having Marin around would make Tamar act with restraint. He knew that about her too; even above clan pride she valued her daughter. She'd keep her from safety even if it meant surrendering a shot at Auchs. He needed both of them to get out of this alive and putting them together would keep them both safer.

He held Marin's eyes and said, "Go with your mother."

"But I—"

"Vitor and Roan have your grandmother to keep them safe until I get there. They'll be fine." He projected certainty in the Force and hoped she bought his lie. "We need to figure out who hired the Mandalorians to strike the Chiss. That might be more important than anything. Go with the Skiratas. They're family too. They'll keep you safe."

The girl shook, just a little, at the word *family*. A family she'd never known, a family that was in so many ways antithetical to what the Jedi stood for. Arlen wondered if he hadn't just made a great mistake, but Tamar put a hand on Marin's shoulder and said, "Don't worry. You'll be fine with us and your father can take care of things back home." She looked at Arlen as she said it. "We don't have time to waste. Get everything you need. *Everything*. Then we'll head over to *Harm's Way*."

Marin nodded and stood. She slipped out of the cockpit without looking back, as though pursued by her own anxieties. Arlen sighed and slumped back into his chair.

"You *know* we'll take care of her," Tamar said, standing over him. "She may be a Fel but she's also a Skirata. Even if she doesn't know it."

"I know. And... thank you. The situation on Bastion.... It'll probably be okay, but I can't be sure of anything anymore."

After a pause, Tamar said, "I need to get ready too. Collect my *beskar'gam* and everything else. Make me a copy of that recording."

"Right. Sure." He added, "Thank you."

"You already said that. Don't go crazy on the long ride back to Bastion. The whole Empire's not going to fall apart just because you're away for a week or two."

"And you think I'm worried about that?"

She gave him a look that said, *I know you*, Arlen Fel, turned, and left the cockpit.

She did know, better than almost anyone in the damned galaxy, but she didn't know it all. Worrying about his family on the long trip home would be bad enough. Much worse would be the endless second-guessing over his actions at Kalee- wondering if he should have shot down that ship, if he should have ignored his instincts and the Force, if acting as a Jedi would cost more lives than it saved. He didn't want to talk about that with Tamar; he didn't want to discuss it with Davek either but he had a feeling that conversation was coming one way or another. He could talk about it with his mother, maybe, if everything was okay when he got back to Bastion.

Too many questions, some which might never have answers. He took out the datacard he'd gotten from Sherev'ath, plugged it into *Champ's* computer, and began to copy the data. That file asked a question that surely had an answer, somewhere, one Tamar and Marin might even be able to find. If they did then it might solve a lot more problems too. It was a hope he'd have to cling to on the solo flight ahead.

Most visitors to Kuat were only allowed access to the great orbital construction yards that ringed the planet. The select and honored few were allowed onto the surface, where miles and miles of lushly manicured landscape had been maintained for centuries as leisure zones for ancient aristocratic houses. The Kuhvult estate was neither more or less opulent than most, but it was enough to elicit some nicely astonished expressions from both Chance Calrissian and his business partner, Volgma the Hutt. Calrissian was from a family two generations rich but still no stranger to luxury; Volgma had been around for four centuries and seen many shameless displays of wealth. That he was able to impress them both gave Kroan some amusement, dull but there; it was the most he got from vermin nowadays.

After Calrissian and Volgma gave their contract pitch to the Board, one Kroan would make sure was approved before the annual

conference for defense contractors at Balmorra in a week, they spent the rest of the day touring the Kuhvult estate. After a visit to a private gallery stocked with priceless art from Alderaan and Caamas they strolled the mile-long arcade where giant marble pillars carved with the faces of centuries-dead Kuhvult nobles rose twenty meters high on every side. They ended the day with a ride over an artificial ocean where a family of imported Mon Calamari whaladons swam freely beneath the transparisteel deck of their water-skimmer.

As the sun set, turning water the same red as the wine they drank, Volgma asked, "Tell me, Chairman Retor, what wings to this estate have you added personally?"

"None, actually," Kroan said. He and Chance leaned over the rail of the skimmer to watch the sun set, while the great Hutt reclined on the repulsor-bed he'd brought with him from Coruscant.

Volgma huffed. "But what of your accomplishments? You should build tributes to them. You're the first Kuhvult to chair the Board in nearly a century."

Kroan smirked at him. "I didn't know you've read into my history."

"Less reading, more *living*. I met Kateel of Kuhvult once. Your grandmother?"

"Great-grandmother," Kroan said evenly. She'd been the last head of KDY before the Rebellion ousted her and nationalized its manufacturing machine. It had cast the Kuhvult clan into disfavor for generations but had also proven useful in convincing Moff Veers of his pro-Empire credentials.

"Ah, of course," moaned Volgma. "I sometimes forget how fleeting human lives are." Calrissian chuckled and shook his head. The Hutt went on, "I knew your great-grandmother as a Kuati noble, but ah, she refused to do business with my corporation. A bias against my race, most unfortunate and all too common, though understandable in her case. Did you know she was once memory-wiped and sold as a slave to the infamous Jabba? A terrible affair, though I heard she made quite the dancer..."

Kroan let the Hutt ramble on. He knew Volgma's history; the Hutt had grown of age on Nal Hutta before breaking off from his Anjiliac clan a little over century ago, when Darth Sidious had been reigning in the Hutts' power with his new Empire. Since then Volgma been a shockingly ethical corporate executive, to the continual surprise of his clients and shame of the Anjiliac. He was still a Hutt, though, and displayed it constantly via keen business acumen, gluttonous appetite, and propensity for self-absorption.

Eventually the Hutt directed his repulsor-sled to the lower deck to get some food. The sun had just dipped beneath the horizon-line and the sky was turning from violet to black. Calrissian tilted his head back, let the wind tussle his curly hair, and sighed.

"So," Kroan said conversationally, "What *is* it like running your business with a Hutt?"

"A trying partnership, sometimes," Calrissian said seriously. "But profitable."

"Good to hear." Kroan tapped his wine-glass lightly against Calrissian's.

"So I can trust you to approve our pitch, right?"

"Oh, I think you'll win enough votes through the merit of your proposal."

"Good to know," Chance chuckled. "So if I'm working with KDY now, does this mean I get an invite to that big conference on Balmorra next week?"

"Why? Do you want to hobnob with more defense contractors?"

"That's the hope."

"Always looking for a good connection. That's the Chance I remember. But it can't all be business. How is the family? Your daughter is... how old?"

"Brenna is sixteen."

Kroan had met her once, a long time ago. A whiny, self-centered little child. "Time does fly."

"You know, I have to ask," Calrissian said, "Why did *you* never marry?"

"I still have time." An equivocal smile.

"True, true. It's just... You must've had opportunities. You've got the money. And, if I'm being honest, the charisma and the looks."

"No need to flatter me, Chance, you've got my vote," Kroan said flatly.

"But seriously, is there an answer?"

Kroan took a gulp of wine. "Married to my work, I suppose."

"Huh. I guess yours must keep you even busier than mine."

"You have no idea." He sipped a little more wine and decided to start angling. "But like I said, time gets away from you. We don't see each other often enough, my friend."

"You can say that again."

"But it happens to everyone, doesn't it? How often do you see that Jedi friend of yours anymore? You two used to be close as brothers."

"You mean Arlen? I talk to him sometimes. But see him, in person? You're right, it has been a while."

"Any idea what he's doing now?" Just a touch of Force suggestion. Calrissian normally had a strong mind but alcohol and beckoning nostalgia softened it.

Calrissian's face went blank for a moment, then brightened with a smile. "You're not going to believe it, actually."

"Believe *what*?"

Calrissian hesitated, like he was wondering how much to say. Kroan pressed further, reaching into his mind with invisible hands, searching for memories and sensations. Calrissian said, "Do you remember, all those years ago, when Arlen and I hitched a ride on your yacht back to Coruscant?"

"Vividly." He'd known about their trip to Broken Moon and reported it to Darth Xoran. Kheykid and those Mandalorian vermin had failed to kill them there; it had been the beginning of the end of the One Sith's plans for Senex-Juvex.

"He's going back there is all. Funny thing. Got an old friend with him too."

"Which old friend?"

Calrissian hesitated; Kroan prodded. The vermin muttered, "Old girlfriend."

The Mandalorian defector, Tamar Skirata. The mother of Arlen Fel's child. The Sith had figured she'd been the one to kill Mordran Krux and wreck their spice-selling scheme. Pieces fell into place.

"When did they leave for Broken Moon?" he pressed.

Calrissian blinked like he'd gone groggy. A stupid mistake; he hadn't named the location aloud. Retor of Kuhvult shouldn't have known it. He'd need to rub that memory free. Kroan reached out to lay a hand on the top of Calrissian's back. The man didn't shift; Kroan snaked his hand up further to the back of his skull, muddling the vermin's thoughts all the while, then reached deeper into his mind.

A conversation, on holo. Days ago, before Fel had left Bastion. Before Calrissian had left Coruscant. The Jedi might have been to Broken Moon already. He must have gotten information from that Twi'lek wench. It was a mistake to use that shadowport as a meeting place; he'd warned Auchs against it over and over but the damned *Mand'alor* never took advice.

He heard the sounds of Volgma returning from below the deck. He smudged the last minute of conversation from the top of Calrissian's memory and removed his hand. When the Hutt rolled out onto the deck, now dark under a black sky, he found Calrissian hunched forward over the railing like he was going to tip into the water.

Kroan, smiling, took the wine-glass from Calrissian's hand and said for both to hear, "Looks like you've had too much to drink."

"I guess so," the man winced and rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry about that."

"Not a problem. Maybe we should turn in."

"I think so." Calrissian turned around and told the Hutt, "You can stay out here if you want."

"No, it's quite alright," Volgma waved a plump hand. "Nothing follows up a good meal like a good night's sleep."

Mental suggestion on Hutts was difficult, even for a Sith Lord, but gluttony did what the Force could not. They retreated to the

Kuhvult family's palatial estate; the twenty minutes it took to get his two guests settled felt like forever. When they were finally in their chambers Kroan retreated to his and activated his most secure communications device. He hesitated; he needed to talk to Veers and Auchs both and decided to try to the Imperial first.

The newly minted Head of State was a busy man, and for security reasons he only communicated with Kroan over this line very rarely. Being hailed on it would be enough to extricate Veers from whatever he was doing now.

When the man's holo-image appeared he was all polite smiles. "Ah, Chairman Retor. What a pleasant surprise."

In his hurry Kroan had forgotten the aggravating small-talk and cloaked language they always used in these transmissions. The communications tech they used were some of the most secure in the galaxy, but for the stakes they were playing for they had to be careful even now.

"Thank you. Congratulations on being elected Head of State. And my condolences too, of course, for all the Empire's lost today."

"Thank you, Chairman. We all appreciate your good wishes," Veers said, so earnest. "On the positive side, I'm happy to report that *Invincible* is operating exactly as promised."

"I hope you can use it to keep the Empire safe from any threat."

"Believe me, I hope so too. While I appreciate the good words, is there a *reason* for this call?"

"A few things, actually. They won't take long. I was wondering about that emissary you sent last month."

"Emissary? Ah, yes, what of him?"

"He made a good impression and I wanted to check in on him. Now, my eyes may have deceived me, but I believe I saw him yesterday morning accompanying Admiral Hallis aboard *Invincible*. Was I mistaken?"

He blinked in surprise. "No. You were not."

"I see. Then I have to ask, was your emissary also present at those delicate negotiations I directed you toward?"

Veers knew exactly what he was saying. His eyes narrowed. "Yes. Is this important?"

"I'm learned recently that those negotiations may have had a compromised security element." Panic flashed on the Imperial's face. Kroan assured him, "I'm doing everything I can to investigate the matter. Rest assured I'll take care of any problems and let you know if there's anything further to worry about. I do, however, insist you ensure your agent cannot compromise things further."

Veers scowled. "He's one of my best men."

The damn vermin was letting sentimentality cloud his judgment. He was a poor emulation of Darth Sidious but he was the best they had to work with. The agent needed to die; that was obvious. He could press Veers but the man might hold it against him, so he decided to try a subtler approach. "I appreciate your loyalty. Can you vouch for his?"

"Absolutely. He'd never break, not even under torture."

"Torture by Jedi?" Veers couldn't speak to that one definitely; when he hesitated Kroan pressed, "Since you seem fond of the man, let me make another suggestion. Send him to me. They may be looking for him in Imperial space but they'll never thing to search for him on Kuat."

Veers thought for a moment. "I see. Well, I think that can be arranged."

"I'm so glad."

"Where and when should he meet your people?"

"Hmmm.... I'm due for a conference on Balmorra in eight days. Have him meet me then." He'd kill the man, of course, but it would be interesting to lock him up and pick through his brain in the Force to see what secrets Veers had been keeping from him.

"I'll arrange that," Veers said. "Is there anything *else*?"

"Just one thing. A curious inquiry. I was wondering if you planned to make any personnel changes among your senior fleet officers? Or has that not been decided yet?"

Veers understood that meaning too. "There is *one* fleet admiral I may have to remove from his post."

"Ah. Do you think he's not up to performing his duty?"

"I think there's some uncertainty about his loyalties. In fact, I have evidence implicating his family in some very questionable activities."

"Do you plan to go after his *entire* family? All his allies?"

"To keep the Empire safe, I don't think I have a choice."

There it was. Veers would arrest Davek Fel and go after the Jedi. They'd lost a dozen knights battling Abeloth and would be weakened, but Kroan had his doubts Veers' best soldiers would be able to take them; vermin were still vermin, and never a true match for Force-users.

Still, he'd alert Darth Wyyrlok. She'd set Sith agents on Bastion in preparation for the attack. Veers had no idea who he was truly in bed with and Kroan planned to keep it that way. Attacking the Jedi on Bastion, killing them or just driving them out of the Empire, would put the whole Order on alert, but his agents said more Jedi, including their Grand Master, had currently gone off searching for Abeloth. When Veers struck they'd be weak and off-balance, slow to respond especially given the political complications. They wouldn't break the Jedi Order yet, but they could deal some crippling damage.

And, Kroan thought, there was one particular Jedi still on Bastion whose death would hurt the Order a great deal. She'd been the Sword of the Jedi in her prime; she'd slain Darth Caedus and nearly killed Darth Krayt himself. Jaina Solo was an old woman now, no master duelist but still a symbol of great importance. Killing her would be the world blow to the Order unlike anything since Darth Xoran killed Ben Skywalker.

It took effort to keep the smile off his face. "Good luck, Head of State Veers. I have no doubt you'll do right by the Empire."

"Thank you, Chairman Retor. I look forward to speaking to you again."

He turned off the transmission. Veers' consolidation of Imperial space was going according to plan, but if the Jedi could trace his connection to the false flag attack it would ruin him. Worse, they might trace his connections further, back to Kroan himself.

Gevern Auchs would have to take care of the rest. Unlike Veers, the Mandalore knew exactly who was employing him. He'd known since Darth Xoran revealed her true purpose all those years ago, during the Senex-Juvex Rising. He'd been a useful tool, but Kroan knew the Mandalorians were using the Sith as much as the Sith used the Mandalorians. In his work for Xoran and Kroan, Auchs had made his mercenaries more wealthy and feared than any time since the Old Republic.

All of that, too, might be on verge of falling down. Kroan patched in the Mandalore's comm frequency and started the call. They were all so close to victory, and he wouldn't let Arlen Fel and his rogue Mandalorian woman ruin everything.

Not a second time, anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When they arrived at Karn'erath the Jedi found that, true to his word, Kyrr Esch had acted quickly and decisively. The Alliance had sent not just a medical team but an entire task force. Two corvettes, two frigates, and one medical ship hung over the planet, all of them overshadowed by a three-kilometer-long Mon Calamari battle cruiser. Like most of its kind its smooth hull was dotted with organic-looking weapons blisters but it also sported a pair of spherical gravity well projectors artfully swelled from either wing. Clearly, they hadn't come to take risks.

"We're being hailed," Jade reported and glanced at the text-readout on the comm console. "They're identify themselves as *Mon Melora*. They say they've been expecting us."

"Good to hear," muttered Ayen Qemar from the pilot's seat. They'd taken the *Jade Shadow* out into the Unknown Regions and Jade had agreed to let Qemar fly her grandparents' vessel without much prodding. The Nautolan woman had been the one to see Jodram's capture by the Sith and had agreed to undertake a second mission to hunt Abeloth. Jade admired her bravery, but as they drew close to their destination her unease had started to show.

Jade glanced at the comm readout again. "They say they've lit a beacon on the surface for us to follow. Supposed to be directly beneath *Mon Melora*. Do you have it?"

Qemar looked at her own sensors. "I see it. Taking us down."

As *Shadow* began to dive toward the planet Jade looked at the console one last time. "They also say we've got a personal welcome extended from Colonel Stefan Horn."

That got a roar of approval from the back of the cabin. Jade looked over her shoulder to see Lowbacca blocking the door with two-and-a-half meters of brown robes and shaggy ginger fur. Also in the cockpit, strapped into their seats, were Master Tekli and the young human woman Valiss. Ohali Soroc waited with the Mortis dagger and the rest of the Jedi team in *Shadow's* main hold.

"I'm glad to see we're welcome," Jade said as he turned her attention back out the viewport. The planet swelled to fill their vision and it looked to her like a normal enough world, with forests and mountains and plains and oceans. As they got closer she made out the gray of cities and *Shadow* dove toward the heart of one such sprawl.

"Is this the city you came to before?" Tekli asked Valiss.

The blonde woman shook her head and said, "This one's different, but it looks the same."

"Abandoned," Jade observed as she watched the empty streets and lightless towers.

Valiss nodded and said nothing. She, like Qemar emanated stronger anxiety than the rest. With Allana back on Ossus, Rollra and Master Qel dead, Valiss was the only member of the team who'd been to the Erath homeworld before.

"Getting close to the beacon," Qemar announced as she circled *Shadow* low over the city. "Looks like they've set up in a clearing."

"A public park?" Jade asked as she spotted a rectangular patch of dried grass, maybe three square kilometers, surrounded by rusting cityscape.

Lowbacca trilled that it looked exactly so. As they swooped close Jade could see a dozen boxy Alliance-model shuttles had set down on the fields. Living bodies dotted the park as well and must

have numbered in the hundreds. Surely, Jade though, they couldn't all be Alliance medics.

The comm console lit up with another hail, this one a live audio link. Jade tapped the connection on and said, "This is the Jedi team aboard *Jade Shadow*."

"Welcome, Masters Jedi," a male voice said. "Is the Grand Master aboard?"

Lowbacca roared a greeting that carried from the back of the cabin.

The man chuckled. "I'm glad to hear it. We've got a place for you to set down."

"I see it," Qemar announced, and turned on *Shadow's* repulsors. "Setting down now."

As they dropped onto the field Jade saw, to her mild surprise, that none of the figures were wearing airproof suits. There were dozens of beings in the white Alliance medical tunics; they didn't seem to be wearing even breather masks.

"I'm not seeing anyone in biohazard gear," Jade said. "Can we get confirmation that it's okay to step out without it?"

"That's correct. I'll explain once you come out."

Despite the assurances, Jade felt a little on edge after they lowered *Jade Shadow's* landing ramp and began descending to the field. Some Jedi, including Soroc, remained aboard the ship, but others went out to meet the Alliance medics, including Jade, Lowbacca, Qemar and Valiss. Tekli led a team of five Jedi healers and the Chandra-Fan, aged and diminutive, moved at the fore of the group in a small personal repulsor-scooter.

Most of the Alliance staff were medics in white, but the man who came to greet them wore military blue. It was clearly no accident that Kyrr Esch had sent Colonel Stefan Horn as part of this mission. While he hadn't been born with Force-sensitivity his father and grandfather had both been knights, and according to Allana he'd been a reliable friend of the Order.

After shaking hands with Jade, Tekli, and Lowbacca, Colonel Horn said, "As you can see, we've been hard at work."

Horn led them across the open field. Alliance medics were outnumbered by hundreds of Erath, most of whom waited with surprising patience on spread-out tarpaulins as they were ministered to. As they started walking amongst the crowds Lowbacca asked how long ago they'd arrived.

"Almost two days before you did," Horn said.

"It seems like your people are making fast work," Valiss observed. "How do you know we can't be harmed?"

"Because the disease is genetically tailored to infect Erath," Horn said. "It was the first thing our medics figured out. We're on the lookout for mutations, obviously, but the virus only seems to activate when it encounters a genetic block that's unique to that species."

"Totally unique?" asked Qemar.

"That's what the medics say. The Erath are from a corner of the galaxy we've had almost no contact with and their genome is radically different from any humanoid species in the Alliance."

Lowbacca suggested that the virus had been specifically tailored to infect Erath and only Erath.

"That's definitely possible," Horn said. "We have medicine that can deflate the symptoms. It's what we've been giving them here, and we've deployed similar medical setups at the other population centers, but there's sure to be many more across the planet, in the villages and wilderness. Right now we're just trying to ease suffering. Because of the strange virus and Erath genetics it's going to take our scientists time to cook up an actual cure."

"It's a fatal disease though, isn't it?" asked Valiss.

"It is. Based on the number of survivors we've found in the cities, compared to estimates of original population, it's safe to say the plague already killed around ninety percent of this planet's inhabitants." The statistic was staggering enough. Hesitantly, aware of how bad the blow already sounded, Horn added, "The disease works very slowly. Most linger on for months, even years before dying."

"It's hideous," Tekli said.

Lowbacca growled that it was punishment of the most malicious kind. Punishment that *she* was clearly feeding off of.

Horn stopped and faced them. "I'm sorry, my Shyriiwook was never perfect, but do you *know* who did this to these people?"

The Wookiee gave a noncommittal growl. Allana had told Esch about Abeloth but clearly Esch hadn't told anyone else, which was surely intentionally and probably for the best. Still, Colonel Horn was a Jedi's son. He deserved to know the danger, and his knowing might even help them.

"We believe the disease was inflicted on the Erath by the leader of the raiders who'd been attacking Imperial Space," Tekli said. "Have they ones you've spoken with mentioned their former leaders?"

"Yes. A king and queen." Horn's eyes narrowed with suspicion. He knew Jedi obfuscation when he saw it.

"Those are the same being in two bodies," Jade told him. "You know her as Abeloth."

Horn's face went slack with shock. He even turned away from them, breathed out deep and spat a curse, before composing himself. With dread he asked, "Do you *know* she's back?"

"We know," Qemar said knowingly. "We need to find her."

Horn planted his hands on his hips, breathed out again, and looked like he wanted to swear some more. Instead he said, "I wish they'd told me this before they sent me out here. They should have told me the danger."

"I'm sure they're trying to keep panic from spreading," Jade said.

"The last time that.... *Thing* was around she drove my father mad. She had him and my aunt thinking their loved ones- my grandparents- were imposters and tried to kill them."

Lowbacca roared, mournfully, that he remembered it well.

"I know. I'm sorry, Master... I just wish I could have been more prepared."

"We killed two of her bodies at Sevok-358," Jade told him. "The raiders seemed to break and scatter after that. Have you seen any sign they've reformed?"

"No. No, I haven't."

"Have you seen anything that might hint where she's gone?" asked Valiss.

"Have you encountered any Erath besides the ones on the planet?" Jade said with an added nudge of urgency in the Force. On the way here she and Lowbacca had discussed the thing that weighed on her even more than Abeloth. Jodram was still alive in the clutches of the Sith. If they'd taken him back to their hiding place in Hapes or elsewhere he'd be impossible to find, but according to Qemar he'd been taken aboard one of the Erath ships fleeing Sevok-358. Finding where those loyal Erath had gone was her best chance of finding her husband.

Horn didn't need the nudge. "Actually, yes. I was going to tell you. About six hours after we arrived in-system a shuttle of unknown design appeared and tried to land. When we attempted contact it tried to flee. We sent a flight of tri-wings to intercept and capture it."

"Were there Erath aboard?"

"Yes. We have them in custody aboard *Mon Melora*. These ones are extremely uncooperative but aren't displaying any symptoms of the disease."

"That sounds like the ones from the flagship," Qemar said. "I wonder why they came back here."

"Must have been homesick," Valiss grunted. "Or maybe their navcomps got fried."

"But they'd risk infection with the disease."

"Would they?" Tekli asked. "Perhaps they've been provided with an antidote *for* the virus."

"Our medics thoughts of that," Horn supplied. "They took samples and are analyzing them now, but there's no initial sign of it."

Lowbacca roared that the disease wasn't just punishment; it was to ensure that the ones who remained loyal to Abeloth would *stay* loyal, for they had no place else to go.

"Colonel," Jade said, "I think it's imperative we speak to these prisoners right away."

"Yes, I imagined you would." Horn looked around the park. "As you can see, we've got our teams fully deployed here, and in the other cities. However—"

"I will stay here with most of my healers," Tekli said. "We'll work with your medics and see if we can't find a cure for this disease together. Until then, we'll use the Force to relieve as much suffering as we can."

"I'm truly grateful, Master," Horn said.

"I'd like to get up there and talk to those prisoners as soon as possible, Colonel," Jade said. "We understand if you have other responsibilities."

"No, I think our medics have the situation well in hand here. *They're* the technical experts, I'm just a soldier." He looked at *Jade Shadow*, then at her. "Your father's ship, isn't it?"

"My grandmother's, if you go back far enough."

The colonel smiled a little. "In that case, I'm going to respectfully request you loan me a ride."

Initial attempts to probe the mind of his prisoner confirmed what Darth Terrid already suspected. Jodram Tainer had grown greatly in the Force since they'd last met. But then, so had he.

The application of Force lightning did some good. Jodram could do nothing but struggle against his bonds. He tried to push back with the Force but Terrid overwhelmed him, drawing on his own deep well of anger as he'd been taught. The sizzling energy hadn't done permanent damage to the Jedi and had weakened his defenses, allowing the Sith to sense the truth to the questions he asked.

He learned quickly that there was little to know. The Jedi had realized Abeloth as their quarry only at Sevok-358. As the monstrosity herself, Jodram only knew the stories he'd been told as an apprentice, just like Terrid. As a prisoner he was next to worthless; why Darth Avanc had insisted on keeping him alive, Terrid couldn't fathom.

As he stood in front of his prisoner, still bound upright by the wrists and ankles the bulkhead, now slumped from exhaustion and

pain, Terrid found himself wishing Avanc had never given that order. During his first talk with Jodram he'd allowed himself to be made weak by the memory of old friendship. Now, with Jodram wounded and at his mercy, he felt a surge of disgust for the human, and for the empathy he'd allowed himself to feel just hours ago.

It would be so easy to kill him; a thrust of the lightsaber, a twist of the neck. Jodram was bound and exhausted, unable to resist. If Terrid killed him then all that nagging memory would be gone forever. It would be like stepping through a door and closing it behind him, more firmly than any other door he'd shut since entering the path of the Sith.

Avanc would be displeased, but, he thought, Avanc would get over it.

He looked down at Jodram, at the vulnerable back of his head and neck, and let one hand rest on the hilt of his lightsaber. No, he thought; something like this, something so personal, cried out to be done by hand.

Then, head still bent, Jodram rasped, "Why haven't you killed me yet?"

Surprise jarred Terrid. He steadied himself with a palm against his weapon's cold hard comfort. "Do you think I mean to kill you?"

"I think you don't. Otherwise you'd have done it already."

"And why would I want you alive?"

"You don't. I can feel that." With a groan, Jodram raised his head so he could look into his captor's red eyes. "So why don't you kill me?"

"Are you *asking* to die?"

"I'm not afraid."

He said it firmly, and when Terrid reached out with the Force he found it was true. The Jedi really *had* steeled himself for death. A respectable choice; given his circumstances Jodram would have been a fool to hold to hope. There was no fear in him, but there was something beneath grim resolve. The emotion resonated with the tiny twinge Terrid had been feeling within himself and trying to smother. It was regret, but not like Terrid's; not a longing for a different fate for himself. Jodram's inner pain focused on others.

Quietly, almost softly, Terrid said, "I know you're married to Jade. That you have two sons and live on Fengrine."

That roused fear in Jodram but again it wasn't fear for himself, only those he loved. "How did you know?"

"It's not secret knowledge, and the Sith have ears in many places." He put on a cruel smile. "We've never moved against your family, though you've left yourselves so vulnerable. But that can always change."

"Do you expect me to thank you for that?"

"It wasn't my decision."

The Sith hadn't moved against Jade and Jodram like they hadn't moved against Allana Djo or a dozen other prominent Jedi, and all for the same reason. All their actions were directed by Darth Krayt, that sleeping Dark Lord, whose dreams and demands flowed through Darth Wyyrlok. She always insisted they wait and build their strength in secret before revealing their full power to the Jedi. Lords like Avanc and Kheykid followed her guidance resolutely, but Terrid knew he wasn't the only Lord who was impatient with her conservatism. Restraint was not the way of the Dark Side; the Force was for breaking chains.

"Somebody *ordered* you to keep me alive," Jodram grunted.

He didn't deny it. As he looked down at this man Terrid yearned to kill him, just so he wouldn't have to see all the buried years in his familiar eyes.

Then Jodram asked, "Do you want to hear about Jade?"

Terrid jerked back a full step. Jodram smiled tiredly at the reward; just as he could read the Jedi, so the Jedi could read him. Indignant rage came easily; Terrid summoned a ball of Force-lightning from his hand and flung it at Jodram's chest. The Jedi wrenched in his binds as the energy danced across his body but he didn't give Terrid the scream of pain he'd been hoping for. The Jedi was using the Force to reduce the pain. He was stronger than Terrid had thought.

When the Jedi lifted his head next there wasn't the smugness or defiance Terrid had expected. Instead his eyes had gone tired and

sad, and even as his limbs twitched with residual pain he breathed, "Oh, Wharn, I'm sorry."

"That is not my name. And save your *sorries* for Jade and the sons who'll never see their father again."

"I'm sorry for them. I'm sorry for you too. I wish... I wish I could have been just a little faster, a little better back then... I could have saved you from what they've done to you."

Shared memory welled between them: the last time they'd been together, the fight on the worldship over Malador. Darth Kheykid had overcome Jodram's defenses and swung a killing blow. Terrid-the boy he'd been- had thrown himself against his friend, risking his life to push them both out of the way. They'd survived, but Jodram's arm had been cut clear off. That had left only the Chiss boy and Arlen Fel to battle Kheykid.

But for the flail of a limb or an extra step, it could have all been different.

"I've become what I've become," Terrid said firmly. "There's no point in regret."

Jodram looked him in the eyes, studied his face, felt for him in the Force. He didn't believe it. Terrid wanted to kill him more than ever and sent another burst of Force lightning into Jodram's chest. The Jedi tried to defend against the pain but Terrid attacked him with another burst, and this time Jodram's mouth creaked open and released a cry of agony.

It was good. Terrid blasted him a third time, savoring the pain as the Jedi's defenses wore down. A few more shocks, stronger than before, would start to savage his internal organs, fry his brain, stop his heart. And with Jodram dead the buried memories would be dead too and everything of him and Jade would be gone from Terrid's life forever and he truly become what he'd irrevocably been forged to be, a Lord of the Sith.

An invisible shove knocked him off-balance. He staggered to one side, steadied his footing, and turned with rage and sizzling hands to see Serissa Lohr standing at the chamber's open door.

"I told you not to interrupt!" he shouted.

"Darth Avanc has arrived!" the Hapan woman snapped. "He wants the Jedi alive!"

It was like another slap, but this time Serissa hadn't needed to use the Force. He'd allowed spite and envy for the child he'd once been to consume him, derail him from the problem of Abeloth. He wanted to lash out Serissa and Jodram both; the girl for embarrassing him and the Jedi for witnessing his shame. Instead he gathered his dignity and asked, "Have we docked with *Intruder*?"

"It's just entered orbit. They're moving to couple airlocks now. I figured I should tell you *before* you killed the prisoner."

Terrid stifled his anger and looked back at Jodram. The Jedi was limp in his binds, eyes closed, and seemed to be calling on the Force for some healing trance. At this point it did no harm to let him.

So Serissa he said, "Thank you for the... reminder. Come, let us meet Darth Avanc."

She stared at him, like she was evaluating him anew. Then she said, "Yes. We don't want to keep him waiting."

She turned and walked out the exit without looking back. Terrid, with greater effort, did the same.

When they took off in *Jade Shadow* they left Tekli and all her healers behind save one, an Advosze named Elin Ranto. On the ride up to *Mon Melora*, Colonel Horn prodded them with more questions about Abeloth, including who'd fought and beaten her bodies at Sevok-358. Qemar and Valiss fielded those questions, and when Horn saw how unpleasant the memories were for them he thankfully stopped pressing for details.

Mon Melora was what Jade expected it to be: a giant slab of clean new war-waging technology, the best the Alliance had to offer. Its crew, as she could sense through the Force, didn't seem especially agitated or worried by their mission. She envied them their ignorance.

Colonel Horn summoned a security team that led them to the detention block. The Erath prisoners penned behind force-fields, four to a cell, had rainbow-sheen skin undamaged by the scars and swelling that marked the plague. When Jade, Lowbacca, and Valiss

walked into the chamber they instantly stood to attention. It was hard to tell with their insectoid multi-faceted eyes, but it seemed like their focus was drawn to the lightsabers dangling from the three Jedi's belts.

As if to confirm it, Colonel Horn said, "That's more than they've ever shown our people. If you wait a minute, the interpreter droid will be here."

"That's okay, I can handle Sy Bisti," Valiss said, and Jade heard the unspoken *mostly*.

Horn and his guards stood to the side but alert as the three Jedi approached the nearest cell. Valiss began speaking to them in the trader's tongue and Jade tried to read these beings' Force-auras, but they were as difficult and alien as those insectoid eyes.

A voice snapped from the adjacent cell. Valiss walked over to the Erath standing close to the force-field, watching the Jedi carefully. A few words were exchanged and Valiss said in Basic, "He wanted to know if we were Jedi. I told him yes."

Lowbacca asked how they knew about Jedi. Valiss relayed the question, then translated the answer. "They said their Queen of Night told them."

"Abeloth?" asked Horn from the door.

"Abeloth," Jade confirmed. "Do they know where their queen is now?"

When Valiss translated the question Erath from other cells started snapping angrily in a language that sounded different from Sy Bisti. Valiss, confused, repeated the question. The lead Erath said something, angrily, and Valiss shook her head. "They don't want to give an answer."

"That means they *know* the answer," Horn said.

Lowbacca told Valiss to ask why the Erath had come back to their homeworld if they knew it was infected with the plague. When she relayed that one the prisoners went sullen and most looked away. Jade thought she sensed some kind of collective regret.

An Erath from a third cell called out something. Valiss translated, "He says they were... *weak*. They felt the Queen calling them, but they wanted to see home again."

Lowbacca rumbled that it was not their home anymore. They'd betrayed their own race to genocide in favor of their monstrous queen. Valiss didn't translate it but somehow the meaning seemed to get through to the Erath; a few lowered their heads as if in shame.

Jade stepped over to the one who'd spoken last. He slumped against the wall of his cell, barely upright and close to the force field. Jade looked straight at him, held those alien multifaceted eyes, and tried to touch him more deeply in the Force. She fell into that place that required surrender and through surrender gained strength; in falling she fell a little closer to the mind of this creature, this pawn, this victim who'd killed so many in ruthless devotion to an abomination who demanded worship. She felt the shame and weariness and regret and she felt the lingering hold Abeloth had in his mind, in the minds of all the other Erath who'd betrayed their race for her monstrous glory.

"You're free of her," Jade whispered, and let the meaning of her words flow through the Force. "You're free of the things she made you do. Reject them and you can choose your freedom."

It wasn't really true; nothing could erase the sins these prisoners had done, and nothing could ever rebuild the Erath civilization that Abeloth had shattered. But she wanted them to believe it, for their sake and for the sake of the mission. For the sake of her husband, who was very possibly now on Abeloth's world.

The prisoner in front of her had nothing else to believe, and through their empathic bond he understood the meaning behind her foreign words. In creaking Sy Bisti he spoke. It didn't seem long, only a few sentences. Whatever his words were they made the other prisoners stir as though in recognition, but none tried to stop him and none shouted him down.

When he was done, Jade and Lowbacca turned to Valiss. The young woman said, "It's a single world orbiting a star located above the galactic ecliptic, straight toward the rim from here. They say we can't miss it."

"I'll get our nav people looking right away," Horn offered.

"Thank you," Jade said, and looked at the Erath still wilting shamefully against the wall. "Thank *you*."

Without even the Force, the prisoner new what she'd said. He nodded, just a little.

By the time the Jedi followed Horn and the guards into the hall, the colonel was already on the comm to the bridge, telling *Mon Melora's* crew to begin looking for this rogue star. As soon as he flicked off the comlink he spun on them and asked, "Any idea what you'll find when you get the planet?"

Lowbacca shook his shaggy head. Jade added the silent hope that her husband would be there.

"You just brought one ship full of Jedi. I'm sure they're fine knights, but you'll probably need more than that if you're hunting Abeloth."

"Are you offering something?" asked Jade.

Horn spread his arms, encompassing this little hallway and the whole huge ship. "I was given broad latitude to accomplish my mission. I don't expect a major threat to this planet but I'll keep the frigates and corvettes here to watch over the medical teams."

Lowbacca trilled that this wasn't necessary, but Horn shook his head. "Respectfully, Grand Master, you're going to need all the help you can get."

He was right, of course, and the Wookiee reluctantly nodded his assent, then his thanks. *Mon Melora* was a mighty ship and its presence should have made Jade feel confident. Instead, for some reason she couldn't name, it only increased her sense of foreboding.

Intruder and the Erath shuttle coupled airlocks and moved together in orbit over a world of swirling greens, whites and blues. It was, according to sensors, the only planet around this lonely star, lifted high above the galactic plane so that the surrounding space seemed to be a great, starless night.

They met in the Erath shuttle for the space it provided. Once they'd reached their destination it had been no effort to flush all of the captive crew out the airlock. The other Erath ships that had fled Sevok-358 had paid that no notice; they'd dived eagerly down to the

planet below, and while Terrid had occupied himself with the prisoner, Serissa had examined the surface with the shuttle's sensors.

"It's a warm planet, lush," she told the three Sith who stood around her. "We're detecting ruins of some kind on the surface, but there's no sign of active technology."

"Where are all the Erath landing?" asked Avanc.

"They all seem to be vectoring toward one location. A large cluster of ruins on the south shore of the northern continent."

"Then she is there," hissed Darth Kheykid, quiet until now.

"That seems likely." Avanc looked at Terrid. "How is the prisoner?"

"He resisted interrogation, but was not badly damaged." He was afraid Serissa might interject and tell Avanc the rest but she did not. Perhaps she was saving it for when he wasn't present. He asked the Keshiri, "What purpose does he serve alive? He knows next to nothing. All he's heard of Abeloth are rumors, legends. I'm sure *you* know more."

"And I will tell you *all* I know in time, Lord Terrid," Avanc said warningly.

"There's only four of us and we don't know what she's doing down there," Serissa said. "You can't be planning to face her."

"Not alone. Darth Maleth and Darth Inexor are leading another group of Sith here, but they have a long way to travel."

"So we wait?" Terrid asked.

"We wait and we scout." He asked Serissa, "Are there *any* signs of sentient life outside that cluster of ruins on the coast?"

"There's no sign of high technology. It looks like this planet has been abandoned for a very long time. Thousands of years."

"Perhaps it was a Rakata world," Kheykid suggested.

"They were active in this space, but so were the Kwa, the Gree, and other races we have no names for," Avanc said. "It may be this is an old Erath world."

"Something must have drawn Abeloth all the way here," said Terrid.

"It's remote. Hard to get to," Serissa said. "Perhaps she just wanted a place to hide."

"No. I think there is more than that." Avanc's brows drew together in thought. "The only way we will know for sure is to get close to the surface and begin scouting."

"We have two ships," said Terrid. "We can bring this shuttle to land like the others while *Intruder* follows in our shadow."

"You would be bait, perhaps," Kheykid said.

"Sith do not shirk from danger," Terrid glared.

Avanc opened his mouth to say something but an alarm pinged in the cockpit. Serissa went in first and the others followed. The Hapan princess had proven surprisingly adept at learning the insides of this alien ship and when she looked at the sensor console her face immediately fell.

"What is it?" asked Terrid.

She breathed deep. "One Mon Calamari cruiser had just dropped into orbit. It's massive."

"The Alliance?" asked Kheykid.

"The Jedi." Avanc sounded only mildly surprised. "I didn't expect them to find this world so quickly."

"You *knew* they would get here?" Terrid stared.

"I knew they were coming and I knew they might reach here before our backup arrived," the Keshiri said. "You understand why I wanted you to keep that prisoner alive, Darth Terrid?"

"What do you plan on doing with the Jedi?"

"What do you think? Abeloth waits for us both below. I don't suppose the Jedi will kindly hold until more Sith arrive. They have the advantage which means we have to negotiate." He turned to Serissa and said, "Send a message. Tell the Jedi we wish to meet them on the surface of the planet for a parlay. Tell them we have a prisoner we're happy to release, as a sign of good faith."

The surface of this nameless, lonely planet seemed to Jade an endless sprawl of flat green; tall grass and clusters of gnarled trees that rose from swampland that stretched back miles from the ocean. When she stepped out of *Jade Shadow* the first thing she

noticed was the salt in the air; then the clamminess, then the heat. Then she turned and looked at the giant ruins rearing out of the landscape, kilometers away and half-faded in the thick air but still staggering. Some looked like the elegant mile-high towers of Coruscant had half-sunk into the swamp and slanted almost to toppling. Others looked like curved scraps of wreckage that had fallen from the sky on a gigantic scale. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before and she couldn't imagine what ancient race had created them.

She couldn't bring herself to care about the mysterious makers. As the Erath shuttle set down thirty meters away from *Shadow* and the Alliance troop transport Colonel Horn had brought down with them, she couldn't even bring herself to care about the Sith that were apparently aboard. She could feel, just barely, their presence aboard the ship but their life-force felt dim compared to the bright, familiar clarion that was Jodram. She reached to him and he reached back. She tried to tell him everything would be alright now that they were together, even if she couldn't actually believe it. He wasn't comforted. He was trying to warn her of something, she couldn't tell what.

The others were taking no chances. She lingered beside Grand Master Lowbacca and Ohali Soroc beneath *Jade Shadow's* nose while a dozen other Jedi placed themselves between Jade's ship and the Sith's. Two dozen Galactic Alliance marines had disgorged from the troop carrier and spread a circle around the Sith shuttle. Several of them, Jade saw, carried shoulder-mounted grenade launchers and dropped to one knee so as to better aim shots out of the meter-tall grass. Colonel Horn himself remained at the carrier, where two dozen more soldiers stood at order.

Everyone watched the Sith ship. As they waited for the landing ramp to open Lowbacca growled, very quietly, that he only sensed a handful of Sith aboard.

"And Jodram," Jade whispered. "I know he's these."

Warm, heavy wind blew across the plain. Grass danced around Jade's waist. Finally, with a clank and a hiss, the shuttle's landing ramp extended. The Jedi ignited their sabers and the Alliance

troops hefted their weapons. The ramp's end dropped into the soft dirt and for a long moment nothing moved.

The first set of feet came into view: black boots, with the rim of a black cloak flowing around them. Even as that figure came into full view another followed: much larger, with bare clawed reptilian feet. They stepped out into the sunlight and their faces became visible beneath the hoods of their cloaks. One was a violet-skinned humanoid. The other was a Barabel with savage red-and-black tattoos across its face. With a shudder, Jade remembered hearing of the Sith who'd fought Arlen, cut off Jodram's arm, and killed Wharn all those years ago. This Sith and Wharn should have died together.

The shock almost distracted her as the last two figures stepped down the ramp. Her eyes immediately fell on Jodram. His hands were bound in front of him and his steps were long and haggard but he held his head eye and his eyes met Jade's across the distance. She stepped out from under *Jade Shadow* and made her way through the grass to the front of the formation of Jedi. Ayen Qemar and the Advosze healer, Elin Ranto, stopped her from reaching him, but she was close enough to make out the sweat that pasted messy blond hair to a face darkened by faint bruises. She saw his eyes, too, and the sadness in them. She didn't understand and tried to funnel relief to him in the Force, but the sadness didn't go away.

Jodram shuffled a few steps to the side, giving Jade a clear view of the final Sith. Two red eyes glowed beneath his hood and daylight showed the blue skin of his gaunt, stern, half-familiar face. Her eyes darted back to her husband who nodded once, eyes sadder than before.

Understanding staggered her. She tried to reach out with the Force and touch this Sith who was Wharn but he ignored or avoided her entreaty. She barely noticed the lavender-skinned Sith step forward until he was just a meter outside striking range of three Jedi blades.

He had no weapons in his hands; instead he pulled back his hood to fully reveal his face. In full sunlight Jade could see the black tattoos lines on his cheeks and chin, which added a savage flavor to his appearance but did nothing to take away from its attractiveness.

She recalled what she'd heard about the race called Keshiri, handsome and violet-skinned, who'd been part of the Lost Tribe of the Sith.

"By name is Darth Avanc," the Sith said. His voice was deep, smooth, dignified. "May I say it is an honor to meet the Jedi Grand Master in the flesh."

Lowbacca roared from beneath *Jade Saber*. Valiss began, "The Grand Master says—"

"I know what the Grand Master said, thank you." Avanc's smile showed small white teeth. "He may be interested to know that his race does not have adepts solely among the Jedi."

That sent a ripple of disquiet through the assembled knights. Lowbacca stepped forward, leaving only Ohali in the rear. The case containing the Morath dagger was strapped conspicuously to her back, and though Jade doubted the Sith knew the case's meaning they must have been curious.

As Lowbacca stepped between Jade and Qemar he roared a request. Avanc, still smiling, replied, "Of course. With me are Darth Kheykid and Darth Terrid."

Terrid. She couldn't help looking back at the Sith who had been Wharn. In his harsh glare there was some echo of the driven, self-punishing Chiss boy she'd known.

Lowbacca's next roar was a demand. Avanc nodded and gave a little wave. A handless push shoved Jodram forward, past the Sith line. Jade— the only Jedi besides Lowbacca without her saber drawn— rushed forward and caught Jodram in both arms. He let himself fall, let his bigger body press against hers.

"Oh, Jade," he whispered, face in her hair, "You shouldn't have come."

She helped him stagger back away from the Sith. The healer Ranto was immediately beside them and the Advosze began running his hands over Jodram's body, sensing for damage.

"Not so bad," Jodram said, though his face was a wince. "No broken bones or anything. Just a lot of Force lightning."

"Was it Wharn?" Jade whispered.

"Terrid. Call him Terrid."

She glanced back at the Sith. Wharn, Terrid, whatever he was, he remained where he'd been. So did the Barabel, Kheykid. Avanc and Lowbacca had stepped within a meter of each other, both his hands open and visible. Avanc was saying, "You know why we're here. It's the same reason you are. Abeloth is here and she must be destroyed before she can wreak more havoc."

"Why should we believe you?" Qemar snapped. "Your kind partnered with her before!"

"They did, and they paid the price." Avanc scowled. "Abeloth ravaged my parents' homeworld. I know more than anyone that she must be stopped."

Jade stepped away from Jodram for a moment; she had to say her piece. "Your kind also made an alliance with Grand Master Skywalker back then. You betrayed him, repeatedly."

"I was told a slightly different version of the story, but I won't deny there were betrayals." The Keshiri said. "You should also remember that fifty years ago she was defeated by two working as one: the Dark Lord of the Sith, and your grandfather."

Jade flinched. She'd been living in peace for a full decade, leading her own life with her husband and sons, and still these Sith knew who she was. But of course they would; there was no escape from being a Skywalker.

Lowbacca gave a suggestion. Before Avanc could respond Qemar grabbed the Wookiee's shaggy arm. "Grand Master, are you *sure* that's a good idea?"

"I'm willing to take him up, even with conditions," Avanc said. A lightsaber fell from his cloak-sleeves into either hand; the Jedi tensed but neither ignited. He held both weapons out. The saber in his right hand Jade didn't recognize, but the left weapon was Jodram's.

Lowbacca called the right saber to his hand, then hooked it beside his own. Jade picked up Jodram's and called it to her. That done, Lowbacca waved an arm. The two remaining Sith stepped back toward their ship. The Jedi shifted carefully away from the Grand Master, never taking their eyes off him. Colonel Horn's

troops stayed exactly where they were, rifles and grenade launched trained and ready to fire on signal.

When they had enough space, Lowbacca and Darth Avanc stepped closer to speak in low voices. Wind rustled grass and erased even the murmurs. Jade turned back to her husband, who was still on his feet as Ranto finished examining him.

"The damage is not severe," the healer said, "But he needs rest."

Jade sidled close to Jodram and let him lean on her. His weight and warmth and firmness felt good; she'd been afraid she'd never feel them again. She passed his lightsaber back to him, and he hooked it onto his belt.

As they watched Lowbacca and Avanc inaudibly confer she asked, "Was he the one who captured you? Did you talk to him? Did he—"

"Jade, please," he whispered, and squeezed her around the waist so hard it hurt.

She tore her eyes back to the Chiss. She could barely see his blue face over the rim of his hood now. Like everyone else, his attention was on the Wookiee and the Keshiri.

"He wanted to know about Abeloth," Jodram breathed. "I told him all I knew. Since it wasn't much."

"But Wharn... Terrid... Did he ask you about *you*? About us?"

"He didn't ask. But I think... he wanted to."

"That Barabel, he was the one who cut off your arm, wasn't he?"

"That's right. And I guess he captured Wharn, all those years ago."

She couldn't image what kind of horrors the Sith had inflicted on the boy they'd known to break him into being one of them. Looking back Wharn had always had a streak that was independent, willful, and proud, traits not always best in a Jedi, but it staggered her to think that those qualities had been warped enough to turn him into a Sith. She remembered his despondency and guilt after Darth Xoran had killed Master Mjalu, and his gnawing need to punish the Sith for what they'd done.

"Jade," he whispered, "You came all this way to fight Abeloth. Don't you have *more*?"

"We've got a Mon Cal cruiser in orbit too."

"But Jade, it's *Abeloth*. Your grandfather—"

"Almost died fighting her, and that was with a Dark Lord's help. I know. But we've got a secret weapon this time. See that Duro over by *Shadow*? She's got something special."

"Do the Sith know?"

"I don't think so. I doubt Lowbacca is telling them."

"Jade, we can't team up with them. We can't *trust* them."

She recalled what her grandfather had done fifty years ago. "This isn't about trusting them. This is about using them."

"Like they use us."

"That's what it looks like."

"Jade, this is a bad idea. I can't—"

"*You're* not doing anything. You're going back to *Jade Shadow* so Ranto can put you in a healing trance."

He squeezed her tighter. "I'm not letting you go out there alone. Not when you've got Sith on one side and Abeloth on the other."

"You're in no shape to fight."

"I feel better already. It's not like—"

A loud Wookiee roar sounded across the plain. Lowbacca stepped back among his people, Avanc to his. The Keshiri, Jade noticed, had his lightsaber again.

"It is decided," Avanc announced for the everyone to hear. "Jedi, Sith, Alliance... We'll all work *together* to destroy Abeloth."

Lowbacca howled his mournful agreement. Jade felt the discord ripple through the Jedi but kept her eyes on Darth Terrid. His head tilted just a bit so he could look at Jade and Jodram across the grass. When their eyes met he turned away, hiding his face again, but just a second of those blood-red eyes glowing in the shadowed hood made her shudder.

"Oh, you shouldn't have come," Jodram repeated. "I'm so sorry."

"It's alright," she lied, then told truth. "We'll do this together. This is the only choice we have."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Marin Fel had been told Mandalorians valued nothing more than family, but she'd heard it from a woman who'd left her own daughter to be raised as a Jedi, so she'd never known what to make of that idea. She'd never known what to make of her mother either. Being on *Harm's Way* with Tamar and Dorn and Ninet was making things a little bit clearer, but she still felt far from everything she'd ever known.

They were apparently on their way to the Chorax system. Marin hadn't heard of it and according to her mother there wasn't much to hear, other than that it was lightly settled and a popular hideout for fringers. Dorn had gotten a message from one of the contacts who'd tipped him to Auchs' and Galaset's activities in the first place, and he'd said he wanted to meet in person to give them new information.

It was a long way to Chorax, so Marin had plenty of time for the awkward task of getting to know the family she'd never met. For her mother, nothing was awkward at all. Tamar interacted easily with her cousin Dorn. Marin watched the two of them slip into conversations in almost-all *Mando'a* when they thought she wasn't paying attention. Her mother smiled easier; it was a kind of sharp, wry smile but it was there, and there was a light in her eyes Marin

had never seen when her mother visited the Jedi academy on Bastion.

She didn't know what to make of Dorn, who was technically some kind of second or third cousin but effectively her uncle. He gave off the air of being tough and taciturn, grizzled and gray even though he wasn't super-old. He spent a lot of time taking apart, cleaning, and putting back together the impressive collection of weapons he kept in *Harm's Way's* storage locker. Marin didn't know how to talk to him.

Ninet was a little easier. She was only a little older than Marin, less than a year. The family resemblance was plain, even though Ninet was a little leaner with a darker complexion. She had that obsessive, punctilious need to keep care of her armor and weapons as her father, which Marin supposed was universal to soldiers and mercenaries everywhere, not just Mandos.

The second day after leaving Broken Moon, Ninet found Marin in her small guest cabin and said, "Can I borrow your lightsaber for a minute?"

Marin didn't know what to say. She kept her saber with her jacket and pulled it out carefully. "What do you want with it?"

"I just want to try something."

"Like what?"

"Bring it. You can do it yourself." She waved for Marin to follow, then ducked out of the doorway, down the hall.

Marin followed the other girl to her own, larger cabin. She had her armor draped out on a stretcher and standing over it she told Marin, "Use your lightsaber on it. I want to see what happens."

Marin gripped her weapon uneasily. "Isn't *beskar* supposed to be impervious to lightsabers?"

Ninet planted fists on her hips. "I've never fought a *jeti* before. I want to see if this material is as good as I was promised."

"And if it's not?"

"Then I beat the *osik* out of the *hutuun* that sold it to me," Ninet said, matter-of-fact.

Marin didn't know all the words but she got the gist. She ignited her lightsaber. Ninet watched the gold-white blade extend

without expression. Marin held it over the armor but didn't bring it down. The other girl her hesitation and said, "It's fine. It won't *shab* with your saber like cortosis."

"I know that," Marin said. Cortosis was a very rare, very expensive material, even more than *beskar*. Good for the Jedi on both counts. She held her saber over the breastplate of Ninet's armor and flicked the blade down.

It hissed against the metal; the metal kicked back in the way she wasn't used to getting from anything except another saber. Normally her weapon sheared through anything with an ease that was frankly scary.

Ninet crouched down and ran bare fingertips over the armor. Marin crouched too; she saw a straight shallow mark where her lightsaber had hit the *beskar* but the material was impressively resistant to her weapon's energy and heat, just like her mother always claimed.

Ninet nodded, satisfied. "Glad to see I got my money's worth."

"Your armor looks nice." Marin touched the smooth material.

"Nice?" Ninet arched a brow.

Probably not a Mando word, then. "Um, tough?"

She nodded; a little better. "I've always wanted to test it. Your *buir* doesn't like to break out her saber for some reason."

Marin had a decent idea why; her mother was descended from a Jedi, and she'd trained as a Jedi, but she'd never felt comfortable acting like one, and that included using a Jedi weapon. Marin knew her mother was good with one; she'd seen her spar with pretty able duelists and hold her own, but she still preferred a blaster.

"You don't have anyone else in your family who can touch the Force?" Marin asked. "Not a one?"

Ninet stood up; so did Marin. "It's not something we look out for or try to cultivate."

"I know." Marin's hand flexed on the shut-off saber; her palm was sweat-slick against its hilt. "I just thought that if it showed up for my mom and her sister, it would have shown up for more. I know the Force doesn't always pass down by blood- my uncle can't touch it at all- but still, I thought there'd be more."

Ninet regarded her. "How much do you know about our family?"

Our family, not *your*. It stung, strangely. "A little. I know our great-grandfather could use the Force and I know he was a pretty important figure on Mandalore."

"*Kad'ika*, they called him. Little Sword. The Sword of the Mandos, like they used to call your *ba'buir* Sword of the Jedi. He said we should stay on Mandalore and rebuild and stop fighting outsiders' wars. He got a lot of people to listen to him too."

Marin knew that; it was why the Mandos and Jedi had stayed out of eachothers' hair for a generation or so, until Auchs took over and put them back on the warpath. "I know his mother was a Jedi in the Old Republic. His father was a clone."

"That's right," Ninet said, "Except I'm not descended from either of them. You and your *buir*, yes, but not me and mine."

"Oh." Her mother had told her once that you could see the old clone genes if you knew what to look for; the sharp nose, the black hair, the slightly dark complexion. Marin and Tamar had those things. Ninet had them moreso.

Ninet sighed. "You *buir* didn't tell you anything else?"

"We haven't talked about it much. I don't see her that often." Marin passed her saber to the other hand and wiped the damp palm on her trouser.

Ninet walked over to a stool, sat down, and crossed her arms over her chest like a disappointed teacher. "My great-great grandfather was a clone too, but he didn't marry a *jeti*. His name was Ordo and he married an accountant."

Marin blinked. "An accountant?"

"Right. Toughest *shabla* number-cruncher in the Old Republic's tax department. After the Empire took over they fled to Mandalore along with a bunch of other clones who were deserting. Most of them got trained by a Mando drill sergeant named Kal Skirata. It's where the name comes from. *Kal'ba'buir* and his deserters had to stay on the run for a long time. A lot of good people died."

"I'm sorry." Marin didn't know what else to say. This was all ancient history, over a century old, but Ninet spoke like it was

personal. That tone wasn't totally unfamiliar; many Jedi talked the same way when thinking of Palpatine's great purge a century ago, even though only a few old alien masters like K'Kruhk had been there personally.

"The Empire tried to squash us. A lot of Mando factions did too. But we're still here.

"What about Auchs?"

Ninet's scowl made her look so much older. "We've had better *Mand'dalore* and worse ones. He's basically teared down everything *Kad'ika* worked for so he's not popular in my family. Your *buir* hates his guts."

"I know." She could see it in Tamar's eyes, feel it in the Force. It was a hate she reserved for nothing else. It was more than just hating what he'd done to the Mandos or her grandfather's legacy. For her he was the source of her exile, the reason her life had gone irrevocably off track.

"My *buir* and I, our other relatives, we mostly keep to ourselves nowadays," Ninet went on. "Some mercenary work. Some bounty hunting. A lot like your *buir*, but our paths don't cross much. We lay low. Sometimes things get dirty."

Marin sighed and switched her saber back to her right hand. "It's all pretty different from Jedi school."

Ninet snorted softly. "You ever use that thing in a fight?"

"No. Sparring, yes. But never for real." Cautiously, she asked, "Have *you* ever been in a real fight?"

The other girl's expression went hard. She uncrossed her arms, gripped the sides of her stool, and leaned forward a little. "This one time I was with my *buir* and a few of his *vode*. We got hired to rob this storehouse, planet on the Outer Rim, you haven't heard of it. I hadn't until we went there. We got past the perimeter guards. Get inside the facility. When we got to the package we found he had a bunch of hired guards waiting. Big tough guys with lots of armor and guns, but no Mandos. So we got in a fight. My *buir* went ahead. I stayed back to cover him. Laser shots were flying everywhere. I heard people screaming."

Marin thought on her simple sparring matches with Vitor; the terrifying chaos of the riot in Ravelin. Those sounded like nothing compared to this. Ninet went on, merciless. "When they realized we had *beskar* and their blasters weren't doing *osik* against it they started using vibro-blades. I saw this big *chakaar* lunge at my *buir*. He was right behind him, with a big vibro-blade up high, ready to stab through the neck. I knew what I had to do. So I took aim and I shot. Took his *shabla* head off." She snapped her fingers. "Nothing but smoke and ash past his neck."

Marin breathed deep. She didn't know what to say or even feel. Ninet leaned back on the stool and said, "That's what we do to survive, *jeti*."

"It's not what I'm used to."

"You might have to get used to it."

"I thought Chorax was supposed to be safe."

"Maybe, maybe not." She nodded at the laid-out *beskar*. "Better be prepared either way."

On the ride out to Chorax, Tamar sporadically checked the news-nets for the latest from Imperial space. No fresh attacks from the raiders, which was good. Head of State Veers was implementing new emergency security measures that included a full-scale planetary lockdown of Kalee, drawing even more ships from the Third Fleet. He'd authorized creation of a new department aimed at rooting out suspected terrorists, separate from the armed forces or police and answerable directly to the executive power, which seemed to Tamar like a disaster waiting to happen.

They had no clue who'd hired Auchs and company to stage a false-flag attack on the Chiss, but as Marin had pointed out, Imps were the likely suspect. As Tamar understood, Veers had been the moff at Yaga Minor but he had an intel background before that. He might have been the type to hire mercs to start a war between the Chiss and the raiders; it could easily have been the intel director himself, or some rogue officer acting on his own, with corporate backing. She could only hope Dorn's contact gave them information that could point the way.

There was other news coming out of Imperial space, also not encouraging. She caught one bit where two talking heads argued back and forth over unconfirmed leaks claiming that, at the Battle of Kalee, the Jedi had allowed the *Grievous* to flee the battle zone despite being nearby and having the opportunity to fire on it. One talking head claimed it might have been an unfortunate error in the heat of battle; the other cast aspersions that maybe the Jedi had *allowed* the *Grievous* to escape. A third blabbermouth joined in and claimed to have heard *another* leak that the order to let the *Grievous* run had come directly from Admiral Davek Fel and had been carried out by the Jedi Master in command of the closest ship: his brother Arlen.

And the worst part was, she could almost believe it. Not the part about Davek; he'd always come off as the good soldier, ultra-loyal to the Empire and willing to make the hard choices. But Arlen would let the ship flee, acting out of some instinct for mercy or a flash of Jedi intuition. In fact, as she remembered his face and shielded Force-aura after learning about what the *Grievous* had done, she *did* believe it. He'd listened to empathy or whispers from the Force and held his fire, maybe even against Davek's orders, and because of that act of generosity they'd all been dropped deep into *osik*.

"Oh, Arlen," she sighed. "You soft-*shebs shabuire*."

"You ever called him that to his face?" Dorn said from behind her.

She jerked upright in the co-pilot's chair. "Knock next time you come in."

"It's my ship." Dorn dropped into the pilot's seat. "Wanted to run some checks. We're about thirty minutes out of Chorax. Should get interesting soon."

"Right."

"What set you off?"

"Just thoughts. How's Marin?"

"You can't ask her yourself?"

"I have. Her answers never get past three syllables, four if I'm lucky."

"Teenagers."

Funny for him to say. Her cousin had been there to raise Ninet as a good tough Mando girl every step of the way. Dorn had been playing up the confused parent act since she'd come aboard but she knew he and Ninet had a close bond, the kind she definitely didn't have with Marin.

"Seriously," Tamar said, "What do you make of her?"

Dorn flipped a few switches, checked a few systems, and finally said, "Very Jedi."

"You're too cruel."

"Not saying that as a judgment. It's what she is. What her *buir* raised her to be."

Tamar still felt judged; *buir* meant 'father' and 'mother' both. "What was I going to do? She was three years old when we decided it couldn't last. I couldn't do merc and bounty hunter work with a kid strapped on my back. She was safer with Arlen. It was the right choice for her."

"Sure."

Dorn worked the console a little more. Tamar drummed her fingers on the armrest. "How are the others? Kragal? Mekr? Jind?"

"All hanging in there. Curious about you, mostly."

"They know about this mission?"

"A little. They know you're with me. Marin too."

Tamar grunted. It had been years since she'd seen some of her cousins. It felt strange enough introducing Marin to two relatives she'd never met before; throwing her into the middle of the whole *shabla* clan would be too much. The simple fact was that the girl was a Jedi, simple as. She'd never be a real Skirata that was that, even if the rest of her clan might politely pretend otherwise so mother and daughter could save face.

Normally Tamar could keep herself moving and pretend she wasn't living a pointless garbled mess of a life, but it was especially hard on this mission. Funny for a Mando, for whom family was supposed to be everything.

"You probably shouldn't stew all the way to Chorax," Dorn said. "Better get you kit and get ready."

"Right." Tamar pushed out of her chair. "I'll make sure the girls are suited up too."

She checked on Marin and Ninet first. Dorn's kid was already inside her red-and-white *beskar'gam* and checking her weapons. Marin had no such suit to slip into, but Tamar helped her strap on a few extra plasteel plates fitted for Ninet's torso. Marin threw one of her cousin's heavy sweaters over the armor, obscuring it, and a civilian jacket over that. According to Dorn their set-down location was going to be cool enough for a teenage girl in bulky clothes to go around and not attract attention. Armored Mandos drew eyes wherever they went, which was why the plan was for Marin to go ahead through the spaceport first, acting as a scout and then a shadow to make sure nobody else was trailing Tamar, Dorn, and Ninet.

When they set down on the planet things went like they were supposed to. The landing zone was a honeycomb of recessed pads walled off from each other. There was only one gate to get to each pad but the security barrier didn't look very sturdy. Dorn passed the spaceport manager an extra bribe to keep *Harm's Way* safe, which also allowed Marin to sneak ahead unseen and begin exploring the streets. The port was two-thirds empty and the town looked half a century past its prime. Snow flurries whirled through the air and stuck to white patches in building-shadows and ditches in dusty, mostly-unpaved streets. Everyone walked fast, head low against the wind, in a hurry to get someplace else. They all cleared out fast for the three marching Mandos.

"Charming planet," Tamar said into the private line that connected her with Dorn and Ninet's helmets, plus the short-range earpiece Marin wore. "Why are we meeting your friend here again?"

"Krevn Salvoc runs a smithy back on Mandalore," her cousin explained. "He's got a storehouse here. Some kind of special ore they mine in the mountain outside town."

"We're well outside of Mandalorian territory," Ninet said. "It should be a safe place to meet."

"Hopefully," Tamar grunted. "See anything, Marin?"

"No tails except me," the girl said. "Do you three know where you're going?"

"I do," said Dorn. "Industrial area. Coming up on our right. Keep following but keep a safe distance. When we get to the location stay a block away. We'll keep the channel open so you'll hear everything."

"Got it." Grim determination was strong in Marin's voice. She was overwhelmed and confused by all this but she'd soldier on and do what she had to.

They kept comm silence for a while after that. Dorn led them down empty lanes between high-roofed warehouses. Many of the metal building sides were scarred by rust; others were dented and a few buildings outright collapsed. Yet in the end Dorn led them to one that looked intact and reasonably secure. Tamar could see a few holo-cam emplacements near the entrance and at the corners which she assumed were in operation.

"Marin," she called, "Are you with us?"

"I am. I think I can get on top of the building caddy-corner to your warehouse. It's abandoned but there's a ladder to the roof."

"Good. Get up there and stay low. Listen but don't do anything unless we tell you to. Understood?"

"Got it. Good luck."

As Marin's line clicked off Dorn announced, "Get ready, people. We're in."

The side door to the warehouse creaked open on old rusted hinges. They found themselves looking back at a Mandalorian with battered gray armor and incongruous red highlights around the T-visor of his helmet.

The Mando waved for them to enter. Dorn went first, then Ninet. Tamar scanned the alleys around them before going in. Everything was deserted. When she stepped inside, she found they were under the broad roof of a massive storage chamber. Metals molded into sheets and beams were stretched out across heavy racks and stacked four layers high.

"Didn't realize you had such a large operation," Dorn said on his helmet's external speakers.

"Not the sort of thing you brag about." Salvoc reached up and removed his helmet, revealing a dark face with a light scar slanting over the bridge of a once-broken nose. "Don't wanna have to spend more on security for this place than I have to."

"What do you use?" Tamar asked, scanning the chamber.

"You can probably see. Automated turrets, some patrol droids. Nothing too expensive."

"Looks like a decent set-up." Dorn was the first of them to take off his helmet. Ninet followed, and a little hesitantly, so did Tamar. She kept the audio feed running from her *buy'c* so Marin could listen into the conversation, but if her daughter had to alert her to something she'd have to use the Force.

Salvoc waved them toward a small room to the side of the main warehouse. It looked like a drab office you'd find on industrial sites galaxy-wide. Datacards and even hard paper volumes were piled on the small desk. Salvoc went to an old cabinet and pulled out a bottle of something clear as water but surely alcoholic.

Sharing something super-strong with your guests was typical Mando hospitality. Salvoc fetched three small glasses from the same cabinet and asked, "Your *ad'ika* drinking too?"

Ninet opened her mouth but Dorn clamped his daughter's shoulder. "Three's fine."

Salvoc put his shot glass on the desk; they put down their helmets. As he raised his glass Salvoc told Ninet, "Sorry I didn't get anything for you, lass. Didn't know you were coming."

Ninet simply nodded, bristling a little at not being treated like a full grown-up yet. The others tipped back and swallowed. It burned hard, even for a Mando drink.

"What the *shab* is this?" Dorn coughed.

"Local delicacy, if you can call it that," Salvoc grinned and shoved the bottle back in his cabinet. "Okay. Ready to get down to business?"

"Very," said Tamar. She was no stranger to strong drink but it felt like it was already rushing to her head.

Salvoc placed his hands on his hips. "So I've got to ask, how did that lead to Broken Moon turn out?"

"We've got information," Dorn said, guarded.

The other Mando chuckled. "Aye, I get it, you're playing things close to the chest. Not that I blame you."

"What do *you* have for us?" asked Ninet.

"If you'd have us fly all the way to this hole, it's got to be something," added Tamar.

"Right you are, lass." Salvoc reached into his desk, fished through the drawer, then tossed out a single datacard.

Dorn took it. "What's it got?"

"Audio copy of a conversation I had with a guy who was part of Auch's mission to the Unknown Regions."

"Did this guy know he was being recorded?" Tamar's words slurred a little, surprising her. Fierfek, that drink had been strong.

"No, and he never will. Just like I never gave you this message. Understand?"

"Very," said Dorn. For a second he wavered on his feet; he had to put a hand to the desk to steady himself. The drink was getting to him too. "Wanna tell me what's on it?"

"You're gonna wanna listen to it yourself." Salvoc seemed smooth and steady. "But basically, he tells a very dramatic and probably accurate story about an attack on one of those raider hives."

Dorn stared down at the datacard, frowning. Tamar frowned too. Her vision swam a little; she steadied herself with a hand on Ninet's back. The girl said, "Is *that* what Auch's went into the Unknown Regions for?"

"Apparently. Didn't tell me who hired them, though."

"He didn't?" asked Tamar. Something wasn't right. Salvoc had either gotten info on *another* Mando mission they hadn't heard about.

Dorn grunted, "That ain't what happened."

That wasn't what happened. That drink wasn't alcohol. Salvoc had set them up. It all came to Tamar in an instant but in her addled state an instant was too long. Suddenly they were there: three fully-armed and armored Mando warriors bursting through the office

door. Dorn went for his gun, too slow. Salvoc grabbed his arm, twisted it, and threw him face-first and hard onto the desktop.

One of the newcomers slammed his shoulder-plates into Tamar's chest, throwing her against the wall. Ninet hadn't been drugged so she moved faster, whipping out a *beskar* shortknife and going at two of the newcomers like she could slip it in their ribs. She was good but they were two big strong men and she was just a teenage girl. One punched her in the stomach, bending her over; the other grabbed her wrists, twisted the knife from her hand, then pinned her struggling body against his broad armored chest.

"*Chakaar!*" Dorn snapped. "Set us up!"

"I'm sorry," Sevoc grunted and didn't let Dorn go. "They didn't give me a choice."

"Don't be too hard on him, Skirata," someone new said. "He was just being loyal to his *Mand'alor*."

Tamar knew that voice. Even though they'd drugged her, even though she hadn't heard it in person in almost two *shabla* decades.

Auchs still had the same silver-and-green armor; it had picked up more pocks and scars in all those years but it was clearly the same set. At his shoulder was a shorter, stouter figure in violet armor. Galaset, probably.

"Gevern *shabla* Auchs," Dorn hissed. For Marin's benefit, Tamar realized. "What brought you all the way out to this hole? Four buddies too. Couldn't get more?"

Auchs ignored him and tilted his visor toward Tamar. "Been a long time, *dar'manda jeti*."

Tamar remembered: Marin listening in on this conversation, bleeding confusion through the Force. The lightsaber in the hidden compartment at her belt. Her captor had pinned her arms behind her back but she didn't need hands to ignite or throw it.

She'd never be a real Jedi or anything close, but she'd picked up tricks she could do even with an addled mind. She reached out with the Force, felt the button to her great-grandmother's saber, and pressed it down.

A blue beam of light stabbed down from her hip, scraping against the *beskar* legplate of the man behind her. It took him by

surprise; his grip weakened. Tamar wrenched one arm free, grabbed her saber, and lunged forward. Her captor held tight to her other arm, holding her out of reach from Auch's, but she used the Force to fling it, a pinwheel of deadly light, right at her object.

The *Mand'alor* sidestepped. The saber skimmed across the shoulder of the Mando next to him, then tumbled into the storage chamber beyond. At the same time Galaset pivoted on his heel, raised his pistol, and popped off a single impeccable shot that caught the spinning lightsaber in mid-air and burst its metal body apart.

The saber's wreckage spilled across the duracrete floor. Pain of loss stabbed Tamar's heart but Ninet was already moving. She managed to wrench partway free of her captor, swipe an arm low, and grab the *beskar* blade she'd dropped on the floor with an underhand grip. As her captor pulled her back up she brought the blade with her and jabbed it hard into the man's thigh, slipping around his armor plate, digging deep into muscle and arteries. Bright red blood spurted out.

"Run!" Dorn shouted above the screams of the wounded Mando. "Go go go!"

Ninet was a smart girl; she knew there was nothing she could do for her father, not here, not with five stronger commandos still able-bodied.

Tamar gave her the only help she could: a shove with the Force that knocked Auch's and Galaset back. Ninet grabbed her knife with one hand and sprayed covering fire with her pistol in her other and she sprinted for the exit.

"Ninet, go!" Dorn shouted, and Tamar reached out to her daughter in the Force, telling *Ninet's escaped find Ninet protect Ninet both of you get out of here if you can go go go go go*

Then something hard collided with the back of her head and that was all.

Marin felt her mother's thoughts stop suddenly, like her consciousness had been extinguished, but there was no pain with it,

just a sudden halt. Her mother was still alive; she had to believe that, just like she needed to act, right now, to help Ninet.

Relayed audio and Tamar's Force-sensations had told her enough. She scrambled across the slanting, broken rooftop of the abandoned warehouse across from Salvoc's place. There were still no Mandos outside and she'd seen none enter; Auchs and his men must have been waiting inside from the beginning.

The door burst open and Ninet sprinted out: armor on, no helmet. Laser blasts flashed through the doorway and a few panged off her *beskar*, not hurting her but throwing her off-balance. Marin watched as two warriors burst out of the warehouse and ran after her.

Marin didn't know what to do; she could ignite her lightsaber, jump down, try to take on both armored men at once, but even with surprise on her side she'd probably just get herself killed.

But she had to do something. She ran across the edge of the roof, keeping pace with the Mandos as they chased Ninet. The building she was on was falling apart; at the far end the ceiling had caved in leaving a weak and free-standing wall.

That was it. She's used the Force to move objects before, and to speed or slow her own movements. She'd never tried it on anything this big before and never in a situation this desperate.

It was all she could do. Just as the Mandos reached the edge of the building she crouched, grabbed the edge of the crumbling rooftop, and swung off it. She hurled herself feet-first toward the free-standing chunk of wall. Her boots impacted; she pushed with all her body, with the Force. The wall moved beneath her, tipping over, falling into the street.

She wasn't sure what happened next. Smoke and dust filled the air, blinding her, choking her lungs. She sprawled across hard metal and then across dirt. She heard muffled swearing but she couldn't tell from which direction.

Then a hand grabbed her arm and pulled her upright. Ninet said, "Thanks for the save. Let's *move*."

They ran without looking back at the broken wall, the Mandos, the place where their parents were prisoners.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

By the time Damien Corde got the chance to speak privately with now-Head of State Veers, he had so many questions piled up in his head he was afraid just opening his mouth would make them all spill out. Why he'd spent the past week guarding Admiral Hallis' body was a minor one compared to what Veers planned now and what he'd really known about the Kaleesh attack that had killed the previous Head of State.

Ascension seemed to have made Veers a more generous host; he had two glasses of Entrallan wine ready the moment Damien walked into his office aboard *Invincible*. After Avaris' death he'd moved fast from Yaga Minor to Bastion but he'd barely set foot on the capital's surface, instead turning the guest salon into his base of operations. Supreme Commander Hallis had spent more time dirtside, tackling tricky administrative duties after passing command of the First Fleet and its new super star destroyer to his most senior vice admiral. That *Invincible* itself had not moved to the border regions as promised was starting to raise eyebrows, but Veers had publicly insisted he wanted to keep it at the capital for now to reassure Bastion's citizens after the terrifying Kaleesh attack. Likewise he'd insisted that, despite being nominally civilian, the Head of State should not cower in a bunker but instead be on the

front lines of the battle to defend the Empire from threats inside and out.

Damien also wanted to ask how much of *that* Veers really believed, but the Entrallan wine stoppered his tongue.

"You've done an excellent job watching over Hallis," Veers told him. "Needless to say you've been my best operative all around. I can't begin to count the number of Imperial lives you've saved."

"Thank you, sir," Damien said, "But protecting Hallis was easy. He was never under threat."

"Of course. But naturally we must ensure the safety of our Supreme Commander after what happened to poor Darakon."

Veers sipped his wine; so did Damien. They stared at each other across the desk. There was more than that and they both knew Damien wanted to ask, despite his loyalty, despite all his professional training. Damien hadn't flinched at doing a lot of possibly objectionable things in the Empire's service. The false flag attack on the Chiss hadn't cause a pang of conscience; they were aliens, he was human, and if their deaths helped buy thousands of Imperial lives, which they had, then there was no question of correct action.

Yet if Veers had any involvement with the attack over Bastion, even if he'd just been warned of it and let it happen, well, he wasn't sure how to feel about that. He'd never liked Avaris much; Darakon had been a respectable administrator but uninspiring. None of that mattered at the core. They'd been lifelong servants of the Empire, assassinated by aliens. He'd been as enraged as anyone by their murder. He wasn't comfortable with this kind of doubt, and though he could hide it from most people, Veers had known him long enough to see through every shield he could put up.

But Veers, it seemed, wasn't up for that confrontation. Instead he took another drink and said, "Agent Corde, I'm afraid I'll have to pull you from your assignment protecting Hallis."

"Another mission?"

"Not exactly," Veers sighed. "I've been informed by a close ally that your... past activities have attracted attention."

He sat upright. "Which activities, sir?"

"The ones initiated at Broken Moon."

He grasped his wine-glass hard to keep it from shaking. "And whose attention?"

"My ally was unclear. But it seems the Jedi may be involved."

Veers was looking at him hard. They both knew what happened to spies who became liabilities and Damien bleated with uncommon panic, "Sir, I've done *nothing* wrong. However this- this security leak happened-"

Veers lifted a hand. "Don't worry, Agent Corde. I'm not getting rid of you permanently."

Relief made him dizzy. "Thank you, sir. What *will* you do?"

"I'll send you on an away mission. Far away. To Balmorra, specifically. If you leave now you should be able to get there in five days."

Now he was confused instead of scared. "Balmorra? Why there?"

"When you arrive there will be a lovely convention going on for members of the military-industrial complex. Among them will be a certain Kuati shipbuilding magnate whom you've already met."

"I'm supposed to stay with Retor of Kuhvult?"

"It was his idea, actually. We both agreed it was best to get you safely out of the way... for now. When this crisis passes, you can be retrieved. You're a valuable asset, Agent Corde. I'd rather not lose you permanently."

Damien knew how much easier it would be to shoot him here and now. Veers was a good leader, the kind who valued his men. He felt ashamed for his suspicions a moment ago. "Thank you, sir. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that. But one request, if I may?"

"Go ahead."

"My wife, sir. Valera. She's down on Bastion and she's pregnant."

"You want to be secluded with her?"

"If possible."

Veers finished his wine glass. "I'll talk to Retor and see what I can arrange. But you're still leaving no matter what."

"Thank you, sir. I want to-"

Veers' comlink buzzed. He plucked it from his uniform- he still wore a moff's olive-greens- and checked it. "Emergency hail from Hallis. How interesting."

"Do you want me to leave, sir?"

"No. I think I know what this is. But step to the side, please."

Damien got to his feet and moved outside the viewing range of the holo-transmitter in the bulkhead. Veers stood up, straightened his uniform, and brought the comm unit to life. The half-sized image of the supreme commander appeared in front of him.

"Head of State, something important has just happened," Hallis said. "The news-nets haven't pick up on it yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Then explain succinctly."

"Of course. We have reports of another alien rising, at two Yagai colony worlds in the Carrion Sector."

The same region as Kalee, Damien thought. After Avaris' assassination the Third Fleet had landed a full-scale occupation force to subdue the planet. Though INN and the other networks were reporting it as a mere police action, Damien had heard that the situation on the planet was turning into a large-scale ground war, with bands of Kaleesh fanatics waging guerrilla attacks on occupation forces in the name of their new martyrs. By keeping news off the networks Veers had clearly hope to keep the alien insurrections from spreading, but that strategy had failed.

The news seemed to wear Veers down. "What damage have they done so far?"

"The Imperial picket fleets over both planets have been destroyed. We've lost contact with all our security people on the ground."

"But nothing in the Yaga system itself?"

"No. I've ordered all the fresh status reports stay classified."

"Good. Detail units from the Third Fleet to restore order on both planets. Send down full occupation forces like we did on Kalee. And Admiral, place all other alien-majority planets in that sector on lockdown. One star destroyer at least in orbit over each."

"The Third has already committed a quarter of its ground troops to Kalee. This will draw them out thin."

"Do whatever it takes to keep the Carrion Sector secure. And look at drawing ships from the First to help."

"I'll start right away. The Second Fleet could assist."

Veers shook his head. "We need to keep our presence in the Yaga System strong. We don't want the natives getting ideas."

"Yes, of course. I'll look at redistribution from the First."

"I'd like to keep *Invincible* at Bastion for now, Admiral. The situation in the Carrion Sector needs to be settled quietly and I want our citizens to keep their attention elsewhere. Keeping this ship at the capital will assure them all is well."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Excellent. Is there anything else?"

"Not for the moment. I'll put the Third into action immediately."

The holo shut off. Veers exhaled deeply and sagged against his desk. It was a messy situation, a complication that could spiral out of control and inspire even more alien uprisings inside the Empire, but it looked as though they'd acted early enough to contain them. Damien knew the thought was presumptuous, but it seemed like Veers was taking it a little hard.

Then the head of state breathed in deep, stood up straight, and looked like a strong leader again. He told Damien, "I knew it would come to this. I didn't expect it to happen quite so soon, but no matter. We'll just move up the timetable slightly."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Agent Corde, if I weren't putting you straight into lockdown when you leave this room I wouldn't tell you a thing."

He swallowed. "Very prudent, sir."

"When we start smashing out insurrections by the subhumans, do you really think Admiral Fel is going to watch us wreck the legacy of his alien-lover father? Do you think his family in the Jedi cult will?"

"Half the Fourth Fleet got smashed by the raiders, and the Jedi are so few-"

"Two cultists were enough to destroy everything Palpatine worked for. We can't forget that, even if everyone calls them heroes nowadays. And half the Fourth could still wreck the First or Second Fleet beyond repair."

"Sir, you're talking a civil war. Admiral Fel is a patriot."

"To the Empire his father made, not the one we're restoring. He's a dangerous element and we can't risk him running free."

It was a situation that could get very messy; Veers was clearly hope that by starting the confrontation, taking Fel and the Jedi by surprise, he could end it fast. "For the good of us all, sir... I hope you know what you're doing."

"For the good of us all, I hope so too."

When he'd called in favors and gathered as much information as he could, it became clear to Lukas Briggs that he had to make a choice, and he had to make it right now.

He still didn't know the contents of those crates Malkin had shipped in from Yaga Minor, but his inquiry with a friend in personnel management from Infantry Division had yielded interesting results. Biographical summaries for the full roster for the 221st Infantry Regiment took a while to go through; Lukas wasn't able to copy the data from his workstation so he stayed late in the office yet again, reading everything over. After a few hours the picture became clear.

A normal regiment had a healthy mix of soldiers. They'd be selected to mix a wide range of training, experience, and specialties to create a combat unit that was flexible and an atmosphere where older soldiers could learn from young ones. The 221st was different. Every soldier profile Lukas reviewed- and he looked through over a hundred- summarized a veteran with combat experience fighting pirates or, more commonly, in security settings. Even most of the low-ranking privates had been imported from local police forces.

The profiles also listed specific unit history, and most of them seemed to have been drawn from a half-dozen other regiments all attached to the Yaga Minor 'Yards. Soldiers transferring from one of the Empire's Twin Pillars to the other wasn't odd at first glance, but

that they'd been gathered from such a small selection of units was. He did further checking and saw that more than fifty percent of the soldiers in the 221st had been transferred into the regiment within the past four months. That was a staggering amount of personnel swapping in a short amount of time; the only thing comparable that he'd heard of had been gathering staff for *Invincible*, and that was the Empire's new flagship, not a security detail that wasn't even supposed to see action.

There were only two ways to find out what the 221st was really here for. One was to ask Homs Malkin. Lukas had barely talked to his old sarge over the past week and had kept the conversation as superficial as possible. If Malkin hadn't let anything slip so far, even after all their nights out drinking, he probably wouldn't furnish much now.

The second way was the one that had beckoned from the start. He needed to see what was inside those crates.

There was no good way to handle that, given that it was his job to know what was in them already. If he requested a construction droid go in and cut off that unbreakable lock, he could claim they'd slipped past his notice thanks to a computer malfunction, but that would lead to systems checks that would out his lie. If he admitted what he'd done and why he'd done it he's tank his own career and Malkin's too, even if his old sarge had done nothing wrong, and right now Lukas had no proof otherwise.

His mind whirled around different bad options until he realized none of that mattered. He didn't have to go through proper channels to cut open those crates. There was another way.

It was only on checking that he learned the majority of the Jedi Knights who'd helped the Fourth in its recent battles had gone back to Bastion. About a half-dozen still remained, including Davek Fel's wife. She and the admiral had moved their quarters off the *Makati* while it was repaired, and Lukas took the admittedly brash step of finding their new place and getting there before the 'Yards chrono hit morning hours.

At exactly 0530 the admiral's security droids escorted him to the cabin entrance and buzzed for his attention. Lukas stood

awkwardly, hands curled to tense fists at his side, and waited for the door to open. He hadn't seen Marasiah Valtor Fel in a long time but he recognized her instantly; the small build, the thick dark hair that fell into her face, the coolly evaluating eyes. She was dressed in a white, vaguely antique-looking tunic that he recalled was typical of Jedi.

She looked him up and down and asked, "Can I help you?" There was a further question in her eyes. He was familiar, but she couldn't place him.

"Thank you for seeing me, Jedi Fel. I'm Major Lukas Briggs, Quartermaster Corp." Still the question. He added, "I was on *Voidwalker*, Jedi Fel."

"I see. Is there something I can do for you, Major? The admiral's already left for the day."

"I was actually hoping to find *you*. There's something I was hoping you could help me with."

Three minutes of explanation later they were on their way. He left out the bit about Malkin and his own role in getting those crates smuggled aboard, going instead with the inexplicable computer error cover story. He realized halfway through that a Jedi might be able to sense he was lying but plowed on anyway. It was too late to turn back and whatever she thought of him, Marasiah seemed interested to open those crates too.

She didn't throw on one of those monastic Jedi robes as she left but the white tunic still drew an uncomfortable amount of attention, to say nothing of the lightsaber bobbing on her belt. She ignored the looks and Lukas tried his best at the same. It was a long way from the habitat section to the storage chambers but she didn't ask questions on the way.

They needed the droid to guide them through the maze of crates to the right ones, but once they'd arrived Lukas explained how the locking mechanism permitted no entry from anyone except Colonel Malkin of the 221st.

Marasiah raised a brow. "Do you know Malkin, Major Briggs?"

Damned Jedi saw through everything. No wonder people didn't trust them. He decided to skip the details and get to the core of it. "He's a Voidwalker."

That was enough; it said a lot. After what they'd all been through seventeen years ago it engendered the strange, strong trust that had brought Marasiah here. It had also, Lukas reflected, got these damned crates here as well.

"Since we can't open the crates ourselves," Lukas said, "We have two options. One is to request a construction droid to cut it open with a laser saw. But I thought you might be quicker."

She rested a palm on her lightsaber. "Major, do you think the security of the 'Yards might be at risk?"

"I wouldn't have come to you if I didn't."

Without a word she ignited the pure-white blade. It flicked, flashed, and cut a perfect circle through the side of the crate. She raised her free hand, palm out, as though to beckon the section she'd cut. With a jerk it tore free of the rest of the crate, moved through the air by invisible grip, and set down on the floor.

Without acknowledging his stare, Marasiah shut off her saber and hooked it back on her belt. "Do you have a glowlamp, Major?"

"Ah, yes, I do." Lukas plucked it from his pocket and turned the light on. He stepped through the hole and into the cargo crate. She followed right behind him.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. There was some heavy-duty armament, including E-web tripod guns and shoulder-mounted missile launchers, plus riot control shields like Malkin had described. Most of the space was taken up by racks of stormtrooper armor, though it wasn't like the stormie whites Lukas had worn. When he shined his light across the chestplates and helmets they had a copper-colored tint and a strange rainbow sheen, like he'd seen on rare metals he couldn't place. He ran his fingertips over the dome of a helmet; it was polished but a little rough to the touch.

"I've never seen armor like this," Lukas said. "Never even heard of it."

"I've never seen the armor, but I know the material." Her voice was grim. "Major, have you ever heard of cortosis ore?"

"Heard of, never seen. It's very rare, very expensive. And very resistant to energy weapons."

"More than resistant. If a Jedi lightsaber strikes it, cortosis causes a feedback loop that short-circuits the saber and disables it for up to a few minutes."

"I've never heard that before."

"It's not something we advertise."

He turned his light on her. "Are you saying this armor is to fight *Jedi*?"

Instead of answering she said, "Let's check the other one."

As they stepped out to repeat the process on the second cargo crate, Lukas flashed his light over the racks of cortosis armor and did calculations in his head. As Marasiah cut a hole into the second crate he announced, "I think there were about two-hundred and forty sets of armor in there."

"Definitely not enough for a full regiment."

"No, but if this crate has the same it would be enough for a battalion."

This time Marasiah went through the hole first, though once she got inside she stopped in her tracks. Lukas shone his light over her shoulder, revealing a few more crated heavy weapons, a few more riot shields, and rows of racks for holding up stormie armor. Unlike the last crate, all these racks were empty.

Lukas called their guide droid over and asked, "Can you tell me when the lock on this crate was last opened? Or is that classified too?"

The droid hovered over to the locking mechanism and inserted a sensor probe into the device. Its dull voice said, "This lock was last opened four point six-five standard hours ago."

He spun around. Marasiah was already behind him. "They must have opened it up in the middle of the night," he said.

"Why didn't they take the rest?"

"I don't know. Maybe they didn't think they'd need it. How many Jedi are in the 'Yards right now?"

"Seven including me. They wouldn't need two hundred suits of cortosis armor just for us."

Her face drew tight in honest confusion, but it was instantly clear to Lukas. Maybe this wasn't clear to her and her husband, but in the eyes of most Imperial citizens they were one in the same: the young admiral and his Jedi wife, dual face of the modern Empire. You dealt with one, you dealt with the other.

"You need to comm your husband," Lukas said. "Right now."

Watching Corrien Veers' sudden ascension had been terrifying enough. Then Davek had received the call from his brother. It was something he'd been dreading not even for what Arlen might say; his actions at Kalee had exploded from a disagreement between brothers to a tipping point in Imperial history and he didn't want to even begin to talk about that over the comm.

What they'd talked about instead had been even worse. Arlen had explained, as succinctly as possible, what he and his ex-wife had gotten at that smuggler's nest they'd visited and attached a copy of the file to his data-stream. He'd summarized it before giving Davek a chance to sit down and watch the recording but even knowing what to expect the sight had chilled him.

As Arlen had said, there was no proof at all that the human meeting that Kerestian Mandalorian was an Imperial agent. He'd put his fleet intel people searching for a Halcyon Blackmor but the name had surely been an alias. The holo-recording was of poor quality; trying to match the voice-print or facial structure to existing computer records of Imperial personnel would be hard, even ignoring the very limited access Davek had to ISB files.

The only certain thing was that the Chiss Ascendancy had been deceived and drawn into a war. He'd considered sending a copy of the message to his aunt Wyn, but there was nothing to be gained by inconclusive evidence. They needed to find this man who called himself Blackmor, wherever he was, and get the truth from him.

Arlen had promised he was on his way back to Imperial space, but he was coming from the exact opposite edge of the galaxy. In the meantime his ex-wife would use her Mandalorian contacts to

search further. When he'd asked where Marin was now Arlen, looking somewhere between embarrassed and regretful, admitted he'd left his daughter with the Mandalorians. Davek had judiciously refrained from comment.

These revelations were just one thing he'd have to look into. Potentially more explosive was the information that had dragged him from his bunk at 0500 hours. When he joined Devlin Jaeger in the vice admiral's office they immediately started reviewing the snippets of information his Fourth Fleet intel people had picked up, mostly passed along unofficially by some counterparts in the Third. Davek already knew that the 'counter-terrorism' actions on Kalee were spiraling into a full-scale ground war, but reports of widespread violence on two Yagai colony worlds in the same sector, and a similarly harsh response from elements on the Third, took him by surprise.

"There's nothing on this from the news-nets," Jaeger told him. "They must be keeping a tight lockdown on information. System-wide jamming fields, probably."

"If they crack down harder it could incite more Yagai colonies, maybe even Yaga Minor. What is Veers *doing*? He was their *governor* until last week. He knows those shipyards can't operate without Yagai crew."

"If he's decided we can't trust them—"

"Then he's decided we can't trust *any* non-humans. They make up almost fifty percent of the Empire's population. Fifty percent of our *citizens*. He's begging for a civil war."

Jaeger coughed politely. "Isn't that a little extreme? Also, the military is over eighty percent human. Senior officers ninety-five percent."

"Yes, but not all ninety-five percent of them think hysterically cracking down on every non-human citizen is the right thing to do. *Right*, Devlin?"

Jaeger sighed. "You know I agree with you. But if we let those colony planets secede we'd—"

A buzzer sounded. Jaeger flicked on his intercom. "Who is it?"

"A visitor requests to speak with Admiral Fel, sir." The voice of his Zabrak aide quavered nervously.

"What visitor, Lieutenant?" Davek asked.

"A Colonel Malkin, sir."

It took him a second to place the name. A Voidwalker, once a stormtrooper, though not one attached the Fourth. He would have remembered that.

"Send him in, Lieutenant." Davek pushed himself out of his chair. To Jaeger he said, "I assume this is important."

"I assume. He was on—"

"*Voidwalker*, right. Razor Company."

Jaeger got up too and walked with Davek to the door. "They keep showing up everywhere, don't they?"

"You know what they say. You can't keep a good man down."

Davek unlocked the office door, letting it whip open. He found himself face-to-face with a big bearded man in a colonel's uniform. He looked like he had about fifty kilos and ten years on Davek. Behind him, standing in rows, filling the corridor leading to Jaeger's office, were over two dozen stormtroopers wearing strange armor made not of white plastel but some slightly rough, bronze-tinted substance.

Davek had a very bad feeling about this.

He forced himself to look at the hulking officer. "Are you Colonel Malkin?"

"Yes, sir. 221st Infantry Regiment. Admiral, I'm here to place you under arrest."

"On whose authority?" Jaeger snapped.

Malkin calmly held up a datapad. "You'll see the signed authorization from Head of State Veers, along with a list of charges."

Davek grabbed it and started skimming. The list was long and couched in legal jargon, but Malkin summarized it aloud. "Admiral Fel, you are charged with treason against the Galactic Empire and complicity in the murders of Neela Avaris and Zek Darakon. You are charged with aiding the insurgents during the Battle of Kalee and assisting the *Grievous* in its murderous attack. You are charged with leaking critical military intelligence to the Jedi against specific

orders by Supreme Commander Darakon. You will stand on these charges for a military trial overseen by Supreme Commander Hallis and Head of State Veers. Do you understand these charges?"

He handed the datapad back to Malkin and said as firmly as he could, "Is anyone *else* being tried?"

"A warrant has been issued for Jedi Master Arlen Fel. Since he is said to be outside Imperial space at this time they've also been issued for several other senior members of the Jedi Order."

It was hard to keep the anger in now. "My wife? My *mother*?"

"That's correct."

"Are you arresting my *sons* too?"

Jaeger put a hand on his shoulder. "Admiral-"

He shook it off. "Colonel Malkin, what are your immediate orders?"

"You're to be taken to Bastion to prepare for your trial. I'm also going to leave a division here at the command section. We have a few questions for Vice Admiral Jaeger."

Before Jaeger could interject Davek asked, "Who's to command the Fourth?"

"Vice Admiral Nevis, sir."

The most senior one, Davek thought. Probably not part of the conspiracy, but someone whose loyalty they thought they could trust. He didn't know how much of this had been planned; whether Veers was stealing an opportunity to get rid of an opponent or whether the engineering had run deeper.

Maybe everything- the *Grievous* incident, the attack on the Chiss, even the damned raiders themselves- had been part of the same long con. Or maybe it was a mix; part pre-planned design, part opportunities grabbed when they passed. Either way, he'd been outplayed. In his shortsightedness, in his grief for his father, he'd allowed himself to be beaten by people bent on destroying what Jagged Fel had built.

It took all his effort not to reach out and snap Colonel Malkin's neck. Instead he held his hands out, waist-high, and said with quiet rage, "Let's get it over with."

Malkin stepped aside so two stormies in bronze armor could snap stun-cuffs on his wrists. Then they started marching: down the hallways, past the work stations so his crew could stare in shock at the admiral with cuffs on his wrists. There were docking ports for shuttles and troop carriers near the Yards' command section but Malkin clearly had humiliation in mind. They marched him through the public promenades so as many as possible could see him and gawk. All the while he had two bronze-armored troopers on either flank, two full rows behind and two ahead.

He was getting really curious as to what that armor was, but there was no point in asking.

When they finally got through the public spaces, they reached the main docking section. As expected, Malkin had a ship ready: a standard-type stormtrooper transport with room for half a company. Two dozen more stormies, all in that bronze armor, were gathered around it, waiting for them.

Malkin didn't slow down. He marched Davek and the rest of his men across the flight deck. Davek felt small relief at not seeing Marasiah here; hopefully she'd find some way to escape her pursuers, maybe to contact Bastion or Arlen and warn them.

For him, though, there's be no escape once he stepped on that transport. Its wide-open boarding hatch was like the mouth of a grave.

As he stared at that dark portal his eye caught something else; something small and dark, falling, barely visible against the blackness of space seen through the hangar mouth.

Then a globe of fire appeared from nowhere, swallowing the whole upper half of the landing craft. The thermal detonator's explosion was gone just as fast but the crippled transported belled smoke and fire into the hangar.

Then alarms started wailing and a wind rushed around them. The smoke from the transport furled in black curtains toward the hangar-mouth and dissolved into space. The containment field around the hangar wasn't completely down; if a portal that size opened to the vacuum they'd all be swept out in an instant. The intensity of the field could be modified, though; someone was

weakening it, draining the chamber of its atmosphere without flushing them all into space.

Before Davek knew it, Malkin grabbed him by the back of the neck and hauled him toward the portal through which they'd entered. Two stormies were already there, banging on doors that wouldn't open.

"Get charges!" Malkin shouted. "Blow the damn thing!"

Before they did anything the sound of laserfire filled the hangar. Davek saw blue stun-blasts rain down and ducked low, out of Malkin's grip. The colonel tried to grab him but a body fell from nowhere, impacting his chest feet-first and sending him skidding across the deck.

A white lightsaber ignited, shearing off the rifle-barrel of the two nearest stormtroopers. Marasiah threw the men back with a burst of Force energy, then bent low and grabbed Davek's arm.

"Ready?" she called, and without waiting for an answer she leaped high into the air, dragging Davek with her.

He was no Jedi. He wasn't used to being propelled up ten meters in half a second and his stomach felt like it was slamming through his hips. Then he and Marasiah both landed hard on a metal catwalk that spanned high over the flight deck. There were a few other Jedi there, batting back red laserfire from below as a few more stormies- white armor, blue stun blasts- fired down on Malkin's troops.

"Are you all right, sir?" called a man in major's bars, vaguely familiar.

Davek nodded, still dazed by it all, and watched as Marasiah cut his stun cuffs apart with a flick of her lightsaber. "Come on!" she yelled. "Fall back!"

Davek had enough sense left to push himself up his feet and run for the upper-level exit. The Jedi, the major, and the friendly stormtroopers followed, and when they'd escaped the major sealed the doors tight and said, "We're clear!"

"Good," Marasiah said. "Pump out enough atmosphere to knock them out, not kill them."

"Already on it."

Davek leaned against his wife. "Great timing. Thank you."

"Thank Major Briggs. He warned me."

"They've left troops with Jaeger. You have to free him too. And—"

"I already sent Knights Sept and Mulk with a company of stormies. It's taken care of."

"No. You don't get it. This is all Veers and he's just starting. He's going after the Jedi." He squeezed her arm so hard she winced. "He's going after our *sons*."

The cast around Vitor's arm had been off for less than a day and he'd already gotten restless. Part of that was because of the dream he'd had the night before. He hadn't remembered much except red lightsabers, figures in dark cloaks and cold rain, but the sense of claustrophobic panic lingered after waking. He couldn't just sit around after a dream like that.

Both the medical droids and the Jedi healer at the Bastion academy had told him not to use his newly-healed arm for anything strenuous. His grandmother had warned him too, and while he normally obeyed whatever Jaina told him, in this case he made an exception and found someone to practice sparring with.

Another reason he was anxious was because of Marin. He'd heard nothing about his cousin since she went off with her parents to the far side of the galaxy. Since building their lightsabers together they'd practiced dueling against each other more often than not, and sparring with someone new left him another kind of anxious.

Kagen Alar was a year older than him. She was taller than Marin, with longer limbs and a longer reach. The way she moved her feet was unlike Marin's steps. She didn't have any of the tells- in her eyes, body language, the Force- that sometimes let Vitor predict what his cousin would do next.

It was very aggravating to fight her but it was also a challenge. He tried to keep that second part in mind, especially as other young apprentices gathered to watch this practice lightsaber duel he really shouldn't have been doing in the first place. His little brother Roan was one of the first to show up. Their cousin Mohrgan appeared not

long after. He was worried one of the adult trainers might come in and scold him and that was *another* aggravation that kept gnawing.

After less than a half hour of dueling, Alar had beaten him four straight times. The fifteen-year-old had good control; even when she got beneath Vitor's defenses and jabbed her glowing silver saber-tip close to his chest or neck it never touched skin or clothing.

After the fourth of her wins she pulled her weapon back from the side of his neck and shut it down. Vitor needed the break too; he reached out with the Force and called a water-bottle to his hand, drank, and tried not to be obvious when he looked around and counted the audience. Almost a dozen apprentices, some younger than him, some older. His grandmother'd get word of this one pretty fast.

Without reigniting her saber Alar asked, "Well? Do you want to try one more time?"

Vitor tried a smug grin. "Sure. I'm finally warmed up."

"Fine. Your punishment." She rolled her eyes and thumbed her saber back on.

Vitor did the same, but as they took their initial dueling stances the door behind them opened and two sets of boots clattered into the hall. *Busted*, he thought.

"Everyone, get up!" Rekkon Sholz said.

Deir Sinde was right behind him and added, "Gather your things and come with us!"

The apprentices looked around, confused, and started to rise from the benches. Sinde added, "Hurry, everyone!" and lurched forward to grab his son Treis by the hand.

"What's going on?" asked Roan as he started for the door.

"We'll explain later," Sholz insisted. "Come on. *Now*."

Vitor fell in along with his brother and Alar behind him. The herd of apprentices followed Sholz and Sinde until they reached one of the gathering areas. There were a bunch of those in the academy and it registered to Vitor that this specific one was deep inside the pyramid, maybe the one furthest from the academy's outer walls.

The space was packed with over thirty people. The holo-projector was on, but instead of the INN broadcast or sports game Vitor was used to seeing there was a three-dimensional projection of the academy's pyramid and the surrounding areas.

Vitor and Roan followed close in Deir Sinde's wake and wedged their way to the middle of the crowd. Their grandmother was on one of the soft sofas, the only person in the group not standing, but like the rest of them she emanated nervous energy.

Vitor looked at the holo-display again. It wasn't just of the pyramid. Red blocks surrounded the structure on all sides. A few more red marks circled in the air. Vitor was the son of an admiral and he knew what representational tactical holos looked like. There was only one thing this could mean, though his mind beggared at the thought.

The Jedi academy was under siege.

To confirm his dread, an insert holo popped up beside the tactical display, a feed from one of the Academy's exterior cams showing the mass of tanks and stormtroopers. It was hard to tell for the holo's blue tint, but those troopers looked like they were wearing different armor than usual; instead of smooth whites the plates had a rougher texture and a different color tone; brown, perhaps.

"Is this everyone?" Jaina asked Sinde.

The knight nodded. "Except for the ones at the perimeter."

"That's good enough." The old woman looked over the group: young knights, younger apprentices. She was the eldest person in the room by over forty years. That alone would have been enough to command respect, but that all knew that Jaina Solo Fel had been part of this Academy from the beginning. If it weren't for her there'd be no Jedi in the Empire at all, and even before she'd invested over half her life in this place she'd been a legendary Master who'd won wars and slain Sith Lords.

The rest of the Jedi saw her as that; for Roan and Vitor, she was that and more.

When she spoke she spoke plainly: "The Academy is under siege. An entire armored division deployed directly from *Invincible*.

They've said nothing except that every Jedi is supposed to exit the academy without weapons and surrender to their custody. We have to assume they're acting on orders from Veers."

Roan looked at the ceiling, as though he could see *Invincible* hovering ominously above them, and Vitor realized with a chill that if Veers was moving against the Jedi on Bastion, he was surely doing something against their parents at Bilbringi.

Jaina went on, "We will not surrender, but against that many tanks and stormtroopers we can't fight either."

"This Academy has defenses," Alar said. "We have shields, we have guns-"

"Not enough to beat what they've brought," Sinde said. "We never expected something like this."

"Maybe we should have," Jaina sighed, and Vitor could feel regrets roll off his grandmother. "But we can't change things now. We can only do what we must to defend the Jedi Order on Bastion. Rekkon?"

Sholz put a hand on the hilt of his saber. "Yes, Master?"

"You're going to come with me. We're going to talk with the general out there." Vitor wanted to bleat an objection but Jaina looked around. "I need volunteers. At least six more knights, please."

"You *can't*!" Roan said. "They kill you!"

Jaina's eyes hardened. "Maybe. But I'm betting they'll want us as hostages for now. Me, at least. It depends what they've done with my sons."

Vitor had already figured that, but it seemed to strike other Jedi as a blow. Sinde asked, "Master, what about the children?"

"Take them, Deir. You know the tunnels. Get them out from under the Academy and escape into Ravelin. Hide if you have to. Escape on a ship if you can. We'll stall them as long as we can. No matter what they plan on doing with us."

It was a bleak plan for a bleak situation. No one liked it; no one could think of anything better. A few knights stepped besides Sholz, volunteering to help buy time. Once a half dozen brave knights stood together, ready for whatever Veers might have for them, Jaina

dropped slowly off the sofa. Standing upright but still so small, she walked slowly to the six and stood beside them.

Roan couldn't take it anymore. "Grandma, you *can't*!"

Jaina's eyes darted to Sinde. "Get started. Take the apprentices."

Everyone snapped into motion. Sinde, still clutching his son's hand, led the apprentices through one door. The Jedi volunteers darted another way, toward the academy's main entrance, save Sholz himself, who lingered at the side of the room to watch Jaina and her grandsons.

The hard look in the old woman's eyes softened and she put one hand on Roan's shoulder, the other on Vitor's. "You have to go now. And I have to go out there and face the soldiers. They'll never buy a surrender if I'm not there, not for a second."

"They'll never buy it anyway if the apprentices are gone!" Vitor pleaded.

"We need you to protect us," Roan added.

A sad, sad smile creased her face. "I'm an old woman. I'd only slow you down."

"No you wouldn't." Vitor pulled her hand off his shoulder and clasped it with both hands. He tried to say more but his voice caught in his throat; water wavered his vision.

Roan said, "*Please*, Grandma. We can't lose you *too*."

That made her flinch. She looked away; tried to screw her face into the cold hard stoic expression she'd kept on these weeks after losing her husband, but she couldn't keep the mask on. She took her hand off Roan's shoulder and wiped the tears off her face.

Vitor was a stranger to grief; he knew that. He'd loved his grandfather but he'd only known Jagged Fel for a fraction of the time Jaina had. She had lost so much more too: both brothers, her cousin, her aunt, all those dear friends. Just the thought of watching Roan or Marin die tore Vitor's heart. He wasn't sure he'd *want* to live if they were gone. He realized that a part of her must have been *ready* to end it, to surrender, to go see all those who'd left long, long before her.

But Roan was right. Vitor squeezed her hand in both of his; it felt so small, so frail. "Please. Not you too."

Then, softly, from the edge of the room, Rekkon Sholz said, "Master, we can do this without you."

She took a moment to compose herself, breathed deep, and said, "Thank you, Rekkon."

"May the Force be with you, Master."

"And you." She reached out with her spare hand, took Roan's, and squeezed it. "Come on. We've wasted too much time already."

She was right; and she she'd said, a woman in her eighties, even a great and powerful Jedi Master, did not move fast. As she guided them through the lifts and hallways that led under the Academy complex she said, "We never thought we'd need strong defenses. Maybe we should have. But at least we prepared an escape route."

"Where does this lead us?" asked Vitor. He wanted to walk faster; he wanted to run ahead, but he stayed beside his grandmother.

"To an industrial center on the outskirts of Ravelin. The land's owned by a private corporation. We had the tunnel installed thirty years ago."

"Does the company know about the tunnel?"

"Its majority shareholder does," Jaina allowed a little smile. "Vitor Reige. Your grandfather had good friends."

"At least Veers doesn't know about it," Roan said, though he sounded more hopeful than relieved.

"We'll escape safely. What we do then... I can't say."

They kept going as fast as they could. Jaina grabbed her grandsons' arms and they helped keep her steady and move a little faster. He could tell she was reaching out with the Force, telling Sinde far ahead to wait for them.

As they moved outside the basement chambers and hallways Vitor was familiar with he asked, "How can we be sure they won't find the tunnel and follow us?"

"We can't. That's why we have to destroy the entrance once we're through."

"That means Jedi can't follow us either," said Roan.

Jaina nodded grimly. They trudged on.

They came upon the tunnel entrance suddenly; the turn of a corner and they were there, at the mouth of a circular portal with a heavy hatch that swung out to the side. Kagen Alar was there and when she saw the newcomers she jumped in surprise and almost ignited her saber.

"Sithspawn, you took long enough," she said, then amended, "Sorry, Master."

"Blame the boys for dragging me along," Jaina said, though she left them hold her arms and shoulders and help her step over the high rim of the hatch.

After they were through Alar swung the hatch shut and locked it with a set of levers. A long, straight, dimly-lit permacrete tunnel stretched before them until its slightly-bent arc dipped out of view.

"The others went ahead," she said. "They'll have to stop and take rest breaks, so if we keep going we should catch up."

"I'll go as long as I can," Jaina said. "Do you have the detonator for the demolition charges?"

The apprentice tapped a small black cylinder on her belt. "I was hoping not to use it, not yet."

"You'll have to. We-" Jaina stopped and closed her eyes. For a moment she went slack and her grandsons held her up.

When she regained her strength and opened her eyes she looked at Alar. "The moment we're in the safe zone you need to detonate those charges and seal the entrance to this tunnel."

"Already? But-"

"We're out of time," Jaina said, very sadly. "The killing's started."

In the end they'd acted fast and prevented Malkin's coup attempt. The colonel and a whole company had been knocked out in the hangar bay, retrieved before waking, and locked in the shipyards' brig. On learning this the company left to detain Vice Admiral Jaeger had been convinced to surrender, and the remaining soldiers from the 221st Regiment had been rounded up before getting access to their weapons or cortosis armor. The Shipyards were still on red alert and security teams, all led by captains Jaeger could vouch for, were on 'round-the-clock patrol. It seemed the insurrection had

been put down, and amazingly enough it had been done without the loss of a single life on either side.

That was a victory, but when Davek saw what was happening on Bastion, there was nothing that could comfort.

Beneath his anger, a small part of him was surprised that Veers was letting the major news networks broadcast satellite images of the Jedi academy encircled by a full armored divisions' worth of hover tanks and walkers. Then the INN reporter, an older human Davek didn't recognize, read word-for-word a release just put out by the Head of State's office.

"This is not a decision taken lightly," the reported read from his prompter. "We are acting to put the Jedi Order on Bastion under direct control of the government and hold them accountable for their actions. Their Masters will receive a fair and public trial in which they will be judged on the following charges: Theft of vital military intelligence. Treason against the Galactic Empire and complicity in the murders of Neela Avaris and Zek Darakon. Abetting the Kaleesh rebels and assisting the crew of the *Grievous* in its heinous attack.

"Our troops are waiting to accept the peaceful surrender of the Jedi so their guilt or innocence may be determined by Imperial law. If the Jedi are not willing to be judged for their actions they will be taken as enemies of the state and dealt with as such. All who aid and abet the Jedi Order will also be considered enemies of the state.

"We regret that these actions had to be taken, but we are taking them for the good of the Empire and the safety of all its citizens."

As soon as the reporter was done reading the press release INN brought on someone else, one of those talking heads Davek vaguely recalled, who immediately began comparing the supposed Jedi assassination of Neela Avaris with their attempt to depose Chancellor Palpatine a hundred-some years ago. Something in the Jedi makeup, he suggested, was openly contemptuous of the laws of lesser beings.

They were watching it all in Jaeger's office, and the vice admiral was the one who mercifully killed the audio. As soon as it was off

Major Briggs said, "Admiral, I am so sorry for all of this. I should have suspected Malkin was up to something, but I *trusted* him."

"We understand," said Davek. "He was your old sergeant."

Briggs shook his head. "He was a Voidwalker. I thought that was reason enough."

Grim understanding passed between the people gathered in the room: Davek, Briggs, Marasiah, Vice Admirals Jaeger and Renwar, Captain Korak. All Voidwalkers. That shared bond was almost twenty years old but it had been forged strong by fire, perhaps too strong. As Davek looked around the room he knew he could trust these people; he had no choice but to trust them.

"Admiral," Renwar said, "What are you going to do?"

"I have to go to Bastion. My-" he looked at Marasiah. "Our sons are there. My mother. Dozens more Jedi."

"They could surrender."

"The Jedi know what happens when an Imperial leader wants them quashed," Marasiah said darkly. "*Everyone* knows."

"Are you going to take a fleet?" asked Briggs.

"If I show up in one ship Veers will try to arrest me. We'll need as many ships as we can to hold off *Invincible*."

"Tactical reports show most of the First Fleet is still spread out across the Braxant Sector," Jaeger put in. "Jump in fast, pull up a wide interdiction field, and you can buy yourself some time."

"Are we talking about *fighting* Veers?" Renwar looked around the group. "Putting aside whether we *should*, I don't think it's a battle we can win. Not with how damaged the Fourth is."

"We've put four star destroyers back in fighting condition already," Jaeger said. "Before all this started, we were making fast progress on five more."

"How's the *Makati*?" asked Korak.

"At the current rate it would take two weeks to fix it up. We could speed things up-"

"We need to move *now*," Davek said. "I need every ship that's ready and captain we trust. Vice Admiral Jaeger, Bilbringi needs you. Keep fixing ships. If a task force from another fleet comes, do *not* let it into the 'Yards.'"

"Understood, sir."

"Vice Admiral Renwar, I need you to start prepping your ships immediately. Captain Korak, how fast can you scramble *Nightwatch* to full crew?"

"Two hours if I sound red alert now."

"Do it. And Captain, I'll be putting my flag on your vessel."

"I'm honored, sir."

"Marasiah, get the rest of your Jedi and their ships. Move to *Nightwatch*. You'll be with me. Major Briggs-" He stopped. He barely knew anything about the man who'd just saved his life. A deputy chief quartermaster now; a stormtrooper with an extra medal for valor back then.

"Admiral," Briggs said, apologetic, "My family is here. My wife and children. And my job."

"I understand. You're now deputy to Vice Admiral Jaeger. Get these 'Yards running and fix the rest of the Fourth as fast as possible."

He nodded, firm, satisfied. "Yes, sir."

"Admiral," Renwar said, "How far do you plan to take this?"

He could see on her face how overwhelmed she was by it all. He wanted to show them the recording Arlen had sent but it meant nothing in itself, not unless Marin and Tamar fetched more proof. "The Jedi are innocent of these charges. I can prove it if Veers gives me the chance. If he doesn't, I'll protect the Jedi from being slaughtered like they were a hundred years ago. We can't become the old Empire again."

"It's not just the Jedi," Marasiah said. "Veers is clamping down on non-humans all over the Empire, even ones in the military."

"We can't stand back and let him do that," Korak said darkly. "I won't."

Renwar winced. "We all know those soldiers deserve better."

"They're good soldiers, loyal soldiers. Our *friends*." His voice broke for the memory of Por Dun. "It's a disgrace. I won't serve an Empire that does that to its own."

"Then we'll force Veers to stop this before it spirals out of control."

Davek pounded fist against palm. "All of you, to your ships. Prepare for-"

"Look," Briggs said, pointing to the muted and forgotten INN broadcast.

The holo-image had dropped the commentators and now showed a high-aerial view of the Jedi academy. A pillar of dark smoke was rising from the base of the pyramid.

"It's already out of control," the major whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Events playing out on Bastion were drawing the attention of the whole galaxy, and Darth Kroan was hardly out of place in stopping his normal routine to watch, even if he knew more of what lay behind the events than nearly anyone. According to Darth Wyyrlok, Sith agents had been placed in Ravelin and were in position to hunt down and eliminate any Jedi Veers' soldiers failed to take. They'd been ordered to hide their presence from the Imperials whenever possible; the more ignorant Veers was of the nature of his partnership the less likely the Jedi would be to trace things back to the Sith.

In the midst of that good news, Kroan got a hail promising even more. He slipped away to his private office and open the comm line to see Gevern Auch's masked face staring back at him.

"Well?" he asked. "Did your trap work?"

"It did. We captured the two Skiratas who were looking into our mission."

"Was the woman with them?"

"We have her."

"And Arlen Fel?"

"No sign of him. We've locked down their ship and are searching it now. No ship matching Fel's is at this port. I don't think he's on the planet."

Quite likely he was racing back to Bastion to save his sons. The question was whether he'd be bringing anything back from Broken Moon. "Where do you have the Skiratas now?"

"I've taken them back to my ship. I'll interrogate them and get everything they know."

"And kill them?"

"That was the plan. Unless you want them."

"The woman can be useful. Keep her alive. The man-" He waved a hand, dismissive.

"You want Tamar Skirata packaged for you?"

"Yes. I don't care about her condition so long as she's still breathing when I get her. Alive she's a hostage we can use against Arlen Fel. Dead she's not."

"I understand," Auchs grunted. "It'll be done. Where and when do you want to rendezvous?"

He thought a moment. Events in Imperial space were still unpredictable. He wanted the Skirata woman alive for interrogation, as Auchs had promised her all those years back in Senex-Juvex. Her escape had started the end of everything. He and Auchs both knew that; it was the only real time his Mandalorians had failed their service to the One Sith.

Kroan could contact Darth Wyyrlok and have her send an agent to meet Auchs. Some things, though, were best done yourself.

"Can you be at the last planet in the Exodeen system in exactly forty hours?"

"Done."

"Then I will see you then, *Mand'alor*. I expect to get what I'm promised this time."

Auchs simply nodded. He knew what Kroan was, what he was capable of, just as Kroan knew Auchs. The Sith Lord closed the link, pondered a second, then brought up the latest news from Imperial space to see how Veers' siege was going.

* * *

Once they knew they were no longer being pursued, once they were close to safe, Marin and Ninet found an empty building in the spaceport to hide, catch their breath, and figure out what to do next. All they had between them was one pistol, a *beskar* knife, and a lightsaber. Their goal was simple but so difficult: rescue their parents and get the hell off this planet.

The landing pit wasn't big, nor was it well-guarded. With a pair of ragged, heavy cloaks thrown over them no one spared either girl a second glance. They went back to *Harm's Way* first and were unsurprised to find one Mandalorian standing guard at the base of a landing ramp that must have been forced open. Marin wasn't positive, but she thought she sensed more people inside the ship, surely ransacking it for useful information. Their copy of the recording from Sherev'ath was aboard that ship and Auch's people might have already found it. The only remaining copy was with her father, and she hoped he'd passed it on to her uncle by now.

Hidden behind a pile of emptied equipment crates, Marin kept watch on *Harm's Way* while Ninet slipped back to find Auch's ship. Marin didn't know what to look for, but her cousin did; after less than ten minutes the Mandalorian girl came back next to her and said, "I found their ship."

"What about our parents?"

"I found them too."

Marin ducked beneath the crates and asked Ninet, "Did you see them get taken inside?"

"I did. Auch and Galaset went in, plus Salvoc. Two more patrolling the outside of the landing pad. Can you get us past them?"

Desperation and need were plain on Ninet's face. Mandos might not have kept high opinions on Jedi, but with her father captured she needed something to believe in.

"I can try," Marin whispered. "We need to get to the landing zone. Scout around."

"Right. Let's get going."

"Your ship—"

Ninet clasped her arm. "Can't do anything about that now. We need our parents back."

There was no arguing that. Marin followed her cousin through the dark and dirty corridors that connected the docking pads. When they passed the cracked-opened gate to an empty lading pad Marin grabbed Ninet's arm and dragged her through the gap.

"We're going the wrong way," the Mandalorian girl scowled. "What are you doing?"

Marin scanned the empty space and spotted a collection of storage crates piled high in the far corner. "Come on. Let's get up higher."

Ninet took her meaning instantly. The girls tossed off their awkward robes and clambered up the crates, Marin first. When she reached the top one it was still a hop of more than two meters to the top of the wall surrounding the landing pit. Compared to knocking over part of a building, she thought, this would be easy.

She drew on the Force for just a moment as she kicked off from the top crate. Then she was in the air, and then her boots slammed on hard surface, and when she looked back Ninet was staring up at her and trying not to look impressed.

"Need a boost?" Marin asked.

"Please."

"Jump. I'll lift you." She'd done with trick with Vitor enough times.

Ninet had strong legs, and even with heavy armor on she was able to jump halfway to the edge of the roof. Marin grabbed with her mind and carried her the rest of the way. Ninet's gloved hands grabbed the edge and she pulled herself up from there.

The Mando girl stood up and scanned the landing zones. From here, atop the walls, they could move quickly from one landing pit to another. Marin asked, "Do you know which way?"

"Over there." Ninet pointed. "Three berths over, should be. Let's go. And keep low."

Ninet dropped into a running crouch, back low, torso almost parallel with the rooftop, blaster in one hand and knife in the other. Marin followed behind her with lightsaber in hand.

When they reached the rim of the right landing pit they fell down onto their stomachs and scanned the area. Auch's ship wasn't much bigger than *Harm's Way* or *Starlight Champion* but it looked newer, sleeker, with an oval shape and four rotating directional thrusters for fast take-offs and landings.

As Ninet had promised, two Mandos walked slow circles around the ship. There looked to be an entry ramp extending from the bottom of the ship but at least one of the guards had it in visual range the whole time. Ninet explained that most Mando helmets had three-hundred-sixty-degree sensors, so even with their backs turned they might still spot two girls trying to sneak aboard. There was no way of knowing what internal security Auch's ship might have too.

"I wonder why they haven't taken off yet," Marin whispered.

"Still got guys at *Harm's Way* searching the ship," Ninet reminded. "They've probably got people out looking for me, too. Tying up loose ends."

"How many do you think there are, total?"

"A ship that size could fit thirty commandos, but I don't think Auch brought that many. Counting him and Salvoc there were only six in the warehouse. Maybe two more to search our ship. Two more to guard."

"That few?"

"I don't think Auch plans to advertise his side trip to Chorax. He's going to want to end this quietly, probably so nobody can trace our parents' deaths to him."

"You're sure they're in there?"

"I saw them dragged in with my *shabla* eyes," Ninet hissed.

"Right." Marin breathed out and closed her own. She tried to sense her mother. Their connection had never been easy and natural like it had been with her father, but all it took was a little effort this time. She sensed anger and she sensed pain; she sensed a desire to hurt so raw and visceral it sent shudders through her body. All of that was coming from Tamar Skirata, without a doubt.

"You can feel them, right?" asked Ninet.

Marin nodded. "We need to get in. But those guards—"

"You think you can take one with your lightsaber?"

Marin swallowed. Ninet might have been a hard Mando warrior, a killer at fourteen, but she was not. She said honestly, "I wouldn't count on it. Can you take out another guy in *beskar* with your knife and pistol? All before they call for help?"

Ninet scowled and shook her head. "We need to get the *shab* inside somehow."

Marin looked around and spotted at a medium-sized repulsorlift dolly hovering unused at the far side of the landing pit, near the gate. When she squinted she could just barely make out the arrangement of the simple control panel.

"You see that cargo dolly?" she whispered.

"Yeah. What do you think you can do with it?"

"Distraction, maybe."

She looked back at Auch's ship. From the look of it, it was designed for fast deployment in any environment, so she wasn't surprised to spot the oval frame of a secondary airlock on the ship's dorsal side, near the aft.

"Can you get us over there?" Ninet had the same idea. "Unseen?"

"That's what the dolly's for. Get ready."

There was no time to second-guess whether she could do this. She could feel her mother inside that ship still: pain and hate and anger all ready to burst. She stared at the repulsor dolly, stared at its control panel, reached with invisible hands across that distance until she could almost feel the hard grip of its control stick.

She grabbed it with her mind and pushed it forward. The dolly jerked too, as fast as its low-grade repulsorlifts would allow, and careened without warning right into the lowered security gate. It plowed through and kept going for two more seconds until it smashed into the corridor wall. The repulsors died and it came crashing down to the ground.

The guards both went for it at the same time. Marin stood up and grabbed Ninet by the wrist. The two girls surged forward and jumped past the edge.

* * *

The next blow was less a slap than a punch. The knuckles of Gevern Auchs' half-closed first slammed into Tamar's cheek and scraped across the front of her jaw, tearing the soft skin of her lower lip. Pain shot across half her face, erasing all other feeling. When she scraped her tongue across her mouth she felt nothing but tasted fresh blood.

Auchs stepped away and began another slow loop around the two prisoners bound to their chairs in the empty storage chamber. Galaset and Salvoc stood against the wall, faces unreadable behind their helmets, but Galaset had a long *beskad* sword dangling from his belt.

"Once my men find your brat we'll take off," Auchs said. "Shouldn't be long now."

"Just kill us and get it over with, *chakaar*," Dorn grunted.

"Why? Do you think I'm some kind of sadist, Skirata?"

"Could have fooled me," Tamar tried to say, but between the residual effects of the drug and the half of her face still numb with pain it came out all slurred.

"You're one to talk, *dar'manda jeti*," Auchs waved a finger. "You should have stuck to what you were doing, chasing bounties on *osikla* planets. Better yet you should have stayed with the *jeti* on Bastion. Then Veers could round you up with the rest."

She lifted her head and tried to blink her eyes into focus. "What.... What happened?"

"It's going on right now, actually. Lockdown of the Jedi academy. Charges of treason leveled against Admiral Fel and your *jeti cyar'ika*. Collusion with the Kaleesh. Accessories to the murder of Neela Avaris."

"You ever get sick of spewing *osik*?" asked Dorn.

Auchs reared back and kicked him in the stomach. Dorn's chair was bolted down; otherwise he could have tipped over. They'd had their *beskar* stripped off before being strapped to these chairs and there was nothing to stop the blow. Auchs' boots cracked ribs and pumped the air out of him. Dorn keeled over as far as his bonds allowed, gasping for breath and retching from pain.

"You damn Skiratas," Auchs shook his head. "Always *shabla* trouble since the days of Palpatine. A refuge for *jeti* and clones and any other freaks you could dredge up. I would have been perfectly happy to ignore you barves but no, you never know your place so you couldn't stop meddling in real Mando business."

"At least we don't sell ourselves to the Sith for twenty years," Tamar rasped.

Auchs froze. Slowly, he turned to look at her. When he spoke his voice was as hard as his faceless mask. "We're feared and respected today like we haven't been for centuries. I did that, *dar'manda jeti*. Me. I've got a planet full of loyal men back home. They'll make sure *nobody* knows what happened to you. The rest of your *mir'osik* half-*jeti* clan might think I had a hand but they'll never prove it. If they even try some blood vendetta we will wipe them out, every single one."

Auchs looked at Galaset and held out his hand. The other warrior stepped forward without a word and placed the long *beskad* sword in his palm.

Dorn had picked up his head by now. He and Tamar both watched the *Mand'alor* step between them, holding the sword upright, as though measuring the weight of the blade. She couldn't glean much from him in the Force- she never could- but his intent felt even more hard and cold than before. It felt lethal.

And she knew, dead knew, that at least one of them wasn't leaving this chamber alive.

"My men will be back from your ship soon," Auchs said, almost conversationally. "They've searched through your data files. Found a really interesting recording you must have picked up at Broken Moon. Stupid of us, using that base. Should have figured that little Twi'lek *dal'ika* had more going on than some nice blue curves. But we'll deal with her later."

The *beskad* swiped out in a flash. Its point stopped inches from Tamar's eyes. A little longer reach, a little less control, and she'd be dead.

Very softly, she breathed, "Show off."

Auchs shifted the blade away. Its sharp edge rested on Dorn's shoulder. Tamar's cousin looked straight ahead, refusing give Auch's the satisfaction of fear in his eyes.

The *Mand'alor* turned his helmet back to her. "Now you're going to tell me a few things. Or you'll watch him die. Don't tell me I'm lying, *dar'manda jeti*. You know better."

She did. She could sense his lethal intent in the Force; not just his willingness to kill Dorn, but his determination to do so. He'd killed her cousin whether she talked or not but he wanted her alive: to suffer, to talk.

And she felt something else too, something she hadn't expected to feel. She felt her daughter somehow, not far away. Marin was telling her to stay calm, stay strong, and get ready.

"First question," Auch's said. "How many more copies of that little recording are there?"

She had to stall. "I don't know. By now there's got to be hundreds."

Auchs pulled the *beskad's* tip from Dorn's neck, then jabbed the point into his right pectoral. Blood welled to stain his dark suit and he bit his lip hard to keep from screaming.

"Don't be cute," Auch's warned. "Let's try this. Who else went with you to Broken Moon? Don't say nobody."

She could feel Marin telling her to hold on it, she was almost there. Tamar swallowed. "Arlen Fel."

"And let's assume Fel is on his way back to Imperial space to save his dear *buir* from the nasty stormtroopers. How long ago exactly did he leave Broken Moon?" A rare hint of amusement crept into his voice. "I'll give you a minute to think. I want to make sure you get it right."

Marin knew her mother was on the opposite side of the doors; she could feel Tamar and feel Tamar press back. Auch's was there too, and probably a couple other Mandos. Ninet had just confirmed that her father had released that agonized scream a moment ago.

For the Mando girl, anger trumped fear. She moved smoothly and steadily to place direction charges at the corners to the door.

She'd kept them in a pouch on her belt, for emergencies she'd said, of which this clearly qualified. As soon as all four were secure she skirted back down the hall, dragging Marin with her.

"Far enough," Ninet said and dug her heels into the deck.

"You sure?"

She hesitated. "Can you block the blast with the Force?"

"I can try."

"Good enough. Got your saber?"

Marin switched it and tried to keep her hands from shaking. She reached out to her mother and tried to tell her they were coming, *now*.

Ninet raised the charges' small detonator so Marin could see it and thumbed the trigger. Marin raised a wall of resistance in the Force; the charges blew the door inward but kicked a wave of hot air back down the hall. Marin softened it with best she could but smoke and ash followed, choking her and obscuring their vision.

Ninet charged anyway. Marin ran right after her, gold saber bobbing ahead. Lasers lit up the smoke ahead. Marin summoned a wave of Force energy to clear the air. She saw Tamar and Dorn bound in their chairs, she saw Ninet throwing herself at Salvoc while Galaset scrambled to take cover behind Dorn and pulled his rifle off his back.

And she saw Govern Auchs, long-blade *beskad* sword in hand, next to her mother. He looked at her, looked down at Tamar; then she felt a flash of rage from him, saw him lift his sword over the woman strapped helpless to the chair.

Marin leaped. Galaset released a round of lasers in her direction that barely registered in time to duck low, roll beneath them, and come up in the space between Tamar's chair and Auchs' legs.

She came up, swinging wildly. Her blade cut too close to block the fall of his sword. Instead it burned through his elbows like they were nothing and kept going. Auchs' body tipped forward and momentum carried the rest; her gold blade slipped above his *beskar* shoulder-plates, beneath the bottom rim of his helmet, and cut neatly through his neck.

Pieces of him clattered to the floor: sword, hands, head. The Mandalore's body, slack and heavy, fell forward. She jumped away and let it fall hard and loud onto the deck.

And for a moment, everyone stopped and stared.

Tamar moved first. Marin was more shocked than anyone; her mother Force-plucked her lightsaber from her weak grip and flung it into her own hands. A flick of the wrists cut her arms from the chair-back; with hands free it was another two quick thrusts to free her feet.

By then everyone had started moving except Marin, still shocked stiff by what she'd done. Tamar grabbed her daughter and, gently as possible, threw her to the far wall. Ninet had pinned Salvoc to the ground and stuck her knife into his chest but the older Mando fumbled for his pistol and fired two bursts into the girl's stomach.

Tamar called on the Force again and pulled Ninet away. She spun toward Dorn, deflecting laser-blasts from Galaset with her daughter's lightsaber. She wielded a Jedi weapon like a Mando: fast, fierce, fueled by anger instead of inner peace. When she got close enough she sheared off the barrel of Galaset's gun. The Kerestian jumped back and reached for another weapon but Tamar jumped over Dorn's head and delivered a fast kick right into Galaset's helmet, snapping his neck back, but that wouldn't be enough. She came down behind Dorn's chair and dipped Marin's saber back, carefully cutting her cousin's hands free of his bonds.

Galaset was coming up again, this time with another blaster. He got off two shots before Tamar was on him; she deflected his shots, got in close, and carefully cut his gun-hand off at the wrist. The Kerestian howled in pain but stood on his feet. Tamar was so tempted to run him through with Marin's saber but a small part of her spoke through the blood-fever: if she could get him alive she could use him.

She used the Force to pin him to the wall and wrench his helmet off. His brown, jowled alien face growled at her.

"Do it, *shabla dar'manda jeti!*" he said, "Kill me!"

A blue stun blast sizzled over Tamar's shoulder and caught Galaset in the exposed face. He dropped. She turned around and saw Dorn, still bound by the ankles to his chair, grasping a blaster pistol with both hands as he sprawled awkwardly across the floor. He didn't say anything; she didn't thank him. She moved quickly and cut his legs free. He immediately crawled to Ninet, who lay on the deck face-up next to Salvoc. She, at least, was breathing, but one of those close-range blasts had slipped between her *beskar* plates. She smelled of scorched fabric and scorched flesh.

"We can't move her," Dorn said, voice shaking as he felt his daughter's pulse.

Tamar spun on her daughter, now pressed against the side wall, staring at the body of the man she'd killed. "Marin!" she snapped. "See if this ship has a medical bay! Now!"

The girl nodded and started for the door just as they heard feet pounding down the corridor. There was no time to hesitate; Tamar charged ahead first and Dorn was right behind her. Two more Mandos, probably the guards outside, had rushed into the ship on hearing the sound of battle. Tamar let adrenaline and anger carry her further; she batted back laser-blasts from the surprised commandos until she got close enough to spear one through the stomach. He grunted and keeled forward; the second popped off a shot that winged Tamar in the shoulder, forcing her back a step and sending pain through her left arm.

Dorn was right behind her, and he'd scooped up Auch's *beskad* on the way. He pushed past his cousin and fell on the remaining Mando. Hard metal slipped through fabric and skin and organs, spilling blood and ending the brawl fast.

"Get to the cockpit!" Tamar grimaced. "See if we can take off!"

Dorn pressed ahead. Tamar didn't hear any more battle-sounds so she lurched after him. By the time she got to the cockpit Dorn was already in the pilot's seat running hands over the controls, starting systems, warming up engines and weapons.

"Looks pretty standard for this model," Dorn commented. "Probably not Auch's personal ship."

"I bet he didn't want to be noticed," Tamar wheezed. She'd spent close to twenty years hating that man. Now that he was gone- the way he'd gone- she had no idea what to feel. None of this seemed real.

Marin popped into the cockpit. "I found a medical bay! Looks full-service!"

"Then let's get out of here," Dorn said, and kicked in the thrusters. They jumped into the air so fast Tamar and her daughter were nearly thrown into each other.

"What about your ship?" Marin yelled. "Auchs still has people there!"

"No choice, then," Dorn gritted his teeth. "I really liked that ship too."

"Wait, what are you-"

Marin was thrown at a bulkhead again as Dorn swooped them low over the honeycomb structure of the landing pits. They could see *Harm's Way* resting where they'd left it, with two little forms scampering around it. They looked like toy figures in their armor as they pointed up at their *Mand'alor's* ship in confusion.

Tamar found the weapon controls. Guns were already hot. She aimed, stabbed the button, and sent a chain of five laser blasts that turned the landing pit and everything it- ships, people- into a ball of flame.

Tamar knew he'd been fond of *Harm's Way*, but Dorn didn't spare another glance at his ship's pyre. She spun them toward the sky and punched them away from the planet. They hadn't stopped bouncing through the atmosphere when he pushed out of the pilot's seat, shoved Tamar down in his place, and went back for his daughter.

They'd safely jumped to hyperspace by the time Marin finally started to get a grasp on everything. Ninet was hurt. She was in the medical bay, sedated and being looked over by her father and the onboard med-droid, which had said she'd probably be okay.

They had a prisoner aboard, one of Gevern Auch's most trusted lieutenants, the one they'd seen in the holo-record Sherev'ath had given to them. They had the bodies of four more warriors, all dead.

The fifth corpse belonged to the *Mand'alor* himself. Marin had killed him; without wanting to, without even trying. She'd simply jumped in to save her mother and swung her saber, desperate, unthinking. It has cleaved through flesh and bone with no effort at all. Murder shouldn't have been so easy.

A couple hours after leaving Chorax, Marin went to the medical bay and politely asked the droid if she could talk to Ninet. To her slight surprise, the droid had waved her forward. Marin's cousin was out of her armor, strapped to a bed with tubes in her arms and a white blanket up to her armpits, covering the place where she'd been shot. Her face was pale. She stared at the ceiling and breathed slowly, steadily.

Marin stopped beside the bed. "Hey."

Ninet rolled her head to see her. "Droid says I'll be okay."

"How do you feel?"

"Like absolute *osik*. But it's better than the alternative."

"Right. Um, I'm glad you'll be fine." She looked down at her hands, uncertain what else to say.

Ninet said, "My *buir* told me what you did. You killed Gevern Auch's."

"Yeah. It, um.... It just sort of happened."

"That's good. You did good. The *shabuire* deserved it. All he's done."

"Yeah. I, um..." She swallowed; her mouth felt so dry. "That time you told me about. When you were at that, um, safehouse or whatever. When you killed that guy to save your dad... Did you feel okay after that?"

Ninet smiled tiredly, sadly. "That was a lie."

"What?"

"Sorry. I was trying to make you think I had hard *shebs*."

"So it never happened?"

"I froze up. My uncle Kragal, he took the shot. Saved my *buir*. Called myself a *hutuun* for a long time after that." She dropped her eyes and added, "I never killed anyone until today."

They both stared down like they were lost in thought; Marin was still too stunned, too exhausted, to think anything clearly. She fumbled to say, "Are you okay? About... what you did?"

She placed a hand on her side. "Salvoc almost killed me. Only fair I kill him, right? And Auchs, he'd have killed you. Without a doubt."

"Yeah. I get that. It's just.... I don't know." She wanted to say *I'm a Jedi, it's not supposed to be like this*, but even in her head it sounded like the whine of a pathetic child. "You probably need your rest."

"That's what the droid says." She reached out and grabbed Marin by the wrist. "You know where to find me."

"Thanks," Marin smiled weakly and pulled away.

She felt a little relief to slip out into the hallway; that disappeared when she saw her mother standing there, arms crossed, five steps away and close enough to have heard everything.

Neither of them moved nearer. Neither knew what to say. In the rush to escape Chorax they'd worked together but once things had gone quiet they'd avoided each other. Tamar had secured the prisoner and moved the bodies. Marin had taken stock of everything in this new ship. Now space and silence yawned between them.

"I've had a chance to look at the news-nets," Tamar said. "Things are happening on Bastion."

Marin stiffened. "What things?"

"Head of State Veers has declared the Jedi outlaws. He's laid siege to the academy. He's declared your uncle a criminal too, but it doesn't sound like he'd been arrested yet. I don't know anything about your cousins or grandmother. Or Arlen. I'm sorry."

Marin stepped closer. "Is it a war?"

"They haven't started shooting yet. But it's probably only a matter of time."

The whole galaxy had turned upside-down. She hugged herself and still felt chilled. "What do *we* do now?"

"I don't know. Dorn and I are going to have a chat with Galaset in a few minutes."

Chat. Interrogation. Torture. It was all too much. She wanted to go back to the Jedi academy, to her father and grandmother, to Vitor and Roan and her other friends, where everything was calm and safe and secure, but even that refuge was gone. She'd been expelled from it all before she knew it, cast into a life where there was only desperation and cruelty and killing.

When she started trembling Tamar's arms appeared around her. She lost strength in her legs and pitched forward. Her mother supported her. She reached up and placed a hand on the back of her head, stroked it, ran fingers through her hair.

Tamar wrapped her other arm around her shoulders, squeezed her tight, and said, "It's okay. Do what you have to. I'm not going anywhere."

Soft words and firm embrace, after all this. Marin rested her face against her mother's chest and allowed herself to cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Vitor had no idea how long they spent marching through the tunnel. He heard his grandmother say that the industrial site into which they'd exit was located fourteen kilometers from the Jedi academy; he didn't know how fast he'd be able to cover that distance at normal speed and they were definitely moving slower than that.

His grandmother was the slowest one. They all knew it but they all kept pace with the old Master out of deference. They stopped from time to time; five minutes every hour, maybe, though he wasn't sure. He could feel Jaina drawing on Force energy to keep herself moving. The invisible energy seeped from without into her body, energizing her muscles and keeping air cycling through her lungs.

During one break Vitor dared ask her what was going back at the Academy. She said she couldn't tell, only that people were dying. He chose to believe that and walked on in ignorance.

When they finally reached the far end of the tunnel there was another hatch like the one they'd left through. Deir Sinde opened it; he and Kagen Alar waved for everyone to stay back and went through the portal, sabers lit, to scope out the surrounding area.

They came back a few minutes later and waved the rest of them through. It was the inside of some vast storehouse, filled with rows and metal racks laden with industrial equipment Vitor couldn't recognize. There seemed to be no one around and Vitor couldn't sense anyone in the Force besides the other Jedi.

The awkward herd- one old Master, one adult knight, and fifteen apprentices of various ages- exited through a side door and stepped outside. The cool wind felt like the breath of life; even the steel-gray sky overhead was welcome after so long in the claustrophobic tunnels. Yet as soon as he registered the breeze Vitor heard the sounds of multiple airspeeders not far away.

"Back in the building!" Sinde called, and the apprentices ducked for cover. Vitor lingered; he heard airspeeders and something more, very distant, a faint sound carried on current of wind. It was high-pitched and repetitive, like a wailing alarm. Then Deir Sinde grabbed his arm and pulled him into the open door-frame just as an airspeeder passed low over the industrial yard.

"Did they find us?" Sinde's son Treis whispered.

"Not yet." His father hooked a pair of small macrobinoculars off his belt and traced the speeders as they flew straight away. "They're not turning around for another pass. Master, do you know which way we're facing?"

From the back of the group, safely inside the warehouse, Jaina said, "I believe they were flying north toward Ravelin."

Sinde's brows drew together. "Why Ravelin? The Academy is east of here."

"Something must be happening in the city," Roan said.

"Yeah, but what?" Vitor looked at the older Sinde, then his grandmother. The two adults shared looks of mutual confusion.

"Hey, hear that?" Alar cupped one ear.

"You mean the alarms?" Vitor whispered. "You hear them too?"

"I hear them," Mohrgan offered.

"Yes, but something else... Getting louder..."

The paused. Vitor took one cautious step out under the sky listen to the wind, the distant repeating wail, and something else, a constant drone that sounded like an animal scream.

Then the pitch shifted down and he said, "TIE fighters. Not sure where."

Sinde nudged him back under cover and motioned for him to stay. Then the knight crouched and jumped up, using the Force to pull himself to the edge of the warehouse's high broad roof. Vitor heard his boots slam onto the metal above and waited another minute until Sinde jumped back to the ground.

"I'm seeing TIEs and local police airspeeders over Ravelin," he reported. "I'm not sure what's going on there."

"The academy?" asked Jaina.

"I see smoke. And TIEs flying circles."

It would be too easy for all their thoughts to fall on the knights they'd left behind to die. Vitor said, "What do we do now?"

All eyes fell to Jaina. The old woman, standing next to Roan, hooked an arm around her grandson's and said, "It's no good trying to run in this situation. We need to stay hidden and we need to find out what else is going on."

"Your mean our parents?" asked Roan.

"And the Academy, and everything else."

"If there is a communications station in this complex, I don't know where to find it," Sinde admitted.

"It's all right," said Jaina. "I know the way. But most of you should stay behind. Stay *safe*."

"I'm coming with you, Grandma," Vitor said and put a hand on his lightsaber.

He expected his grandmother to refuse. He expected her to say he was too young, it was too risky, he'd best go back into that hidden tunnel and hide with the other kids until salvation came from above.

But she gave him a simple up-down look and something serious came over her face, like she'd discovered something about him for the first time. The look made him uncomfortable but he didn't shirk from it.

"All right," Jaina said. "But stay close, Vitor. I want you by my side."

* * *

In the end, Davek gathered the best fleet he could. Every fighting-fit ship in the Fourth was pulled from Bilbringi and sent hurtling through hyperspace toward Bastion. He had twelve star destroyers in all, including the fleet carrier *Nightwatch* on which he'd put his flag, plus three times the number of smaller frigates, corvettes, and gunships. It was a good-sized force, but Veers had the entire First Fleet in the Braxant Sector. The Second Fleet, best Davek could tell, was still at Yaga Minor but if Veers decided to summon Admiral Grave to his side, as he very likely would, then the battle would be over in a flash. Davek's only hope was to end this before it started; if he had to fight it needed to be a short, small, contained battle.

The too-fast, too-short hours en route to the capital were spent running systems checks, readying weapons and support craft, and doing everything possible to prepare for a battle every one of them prayed they wouldn't have to fight.

They reverted to realspace at the edge of Bastion's gravity well and continued to plunge downward toward the planet at full sublight speed. The two interdictor cruisers Davek had brought along immediately started warming their gravity wells generators, hoping to raise a wider interdiction field around the planet that would prevent surprise attacks from vessels in the First or Second Fleets that weren't presently close to the planet.

What was waiting for them at Bastion was bad enough. Long and pale, thin like an eighteen-kilometer sword, the Empire's newest super star destroyer sat directly atop the planet's northern pole. A few *Predator*-class destroyers, as well as Admiral Hallis' *Legator*-class flagship *Sentinel*, were further out from the planet but immediately began falling toward it. Two more star destroyers, hefty *Compellor*-class ships, were lower in orbit, almost at the edge of the atmospheric shell, and much closer to Ravelin. The sprawling city that housed most of the Empire's government and bureaucratic apparatuses was currently swathed in clouds and fast slipping toward the planet's night side. It was impossible to get a visual lock on the Jedi academy or anything going on in the city, but the fine-tuned sensor package aboard *Nightwatch* could pick up infrared emissions well beyond what the metropolis normally produced.

In the midst of frantic preparations, Davek had watching the INN broadcast for updates. Two hours before arrival the network had been cut off entirely. One by one, the smaller news networks had also gone silent. The last one to shut down had been an often-overlooked independent station. It had reported that large-scale riots had broken out in Ravelin and Bastion's other major cities. Holo-footage from the center of Ravelin confirmed what Davek wouldn't have normally believed: thousands, if not millions, had taken to the streets in *support* of the Jedi Order. The last images shown before its signal died it had been the sky over the protesters swarming with TIE fighters. Not police air speeders but military craft.

The next forty-five minutes until the fleet arrival had been painfully tense. Davek had hoped to learn more about what was happening on the ground when they hit orbit but cloud cover and a jamming field from *Invincible* left his and his fleet blind and ignorant just when they needed information.

Veers' response was fast but not reckless. He'd hoped to arrest Davek quickly and quietly; a firefight over Bastion was exactly what he'd been trying to avoid. The two destroyers nearest to Ravelin began deploying fighters, a healthy mix of TIE-X interceptors and TIE Demolishers for anti-capital ship combat. A dozen gunships and frigates, quicker than the big destroyers, raced to intercept Davek's fleet. They had no chance of taking down his twelve star destroyers; instead of opening fire they approached Davek's formation and settled themselves into it, as if daring the newcomers to shoot.

Davek wasn't ready for that yet. On *Nightwatch*'s bridge he could see the tactical holo; Admiral Hallis' *Sentinel* would be here in less than twenty minutes and *Invincible* was slowly, steadily moving from its perch over Bastions' polar cap. It was still seven minutes away.

As per the battle plan he'd hastily assembled on the way here, *Nightwatch* was at the tip of the attacking wedge. Hundreds of TIE fighters and dozens of landing craft, all loaded with loyal stormtroopers, were ready to launch on his word. At the rear of the

formation, Vice Admiral Renwar held back with two more destroyers in addition to her *Tempest*. If *Sentinel* came in guns-blazing, they'd take the brunt of the attack.

Davek was still praying it wouldn't come to that. "Captain," he asked, "Can we hail *Invincible*?"

"Doing it now," Korak said from the comm station, where he hovered over the shoulder of an anxious lieutenant. Korak was keeping his cool much better than the young ensign Davek remembered from *Voidwalker*, but one hand still hung at his side, a fist that clenched tight, loosened and tightened again in repetition.

Davek's whole body twitched with energy but he tried to keep his voice steady when the comm lieutenant gave him the signal to talk.

"This is Admiral Davek Fel, commander of the Imperial Fourth Fleet. I need to speak with Corrien Veers at once."

The other man's holo-image sprung into existence. With the same steady tone and haughty lilt, Veers said, "This is the legally elected Head of State, *Mister* Fel. I'd remind you whose title is valid here."

"I reject *your* unlawful attempt to remove me from my position. I am still commander of the Fourth as appointed by Supreme Commander Darakon."

"You reject Hallis' authority?"

Veers was trying to draw him into technicalities, waste his time. The two closest destroyers were already deploying fighter screens. If Davek was going to send ships down to the planet they'd have to fight their way through.

"I've come to stop your illegal action against the Jedi Order, and against those Imperial citizens who support it."

"I have only done what is my duty by law as part of the emergency powers granted to me by the constitution *your* father helped draw. The Jedi are treasonous agents, just as you are, and they are being taken into custody so they may stand trial under Imperial law. Do you respect that law or don't you, Mister Fel?"

"If you're respecting that law, lower the jamming field. Let me see the Jedi academy. Let me talk to the Jedi."

"I will do nothing to compromise the security of this law enforcement operation in progress. If you would only wait to see—"

Davek snapped his fingers and the lieutenant killed the transmission. Korak said, "Sir, we don't have much more time."

"I'm aware, Captain."

"Sir, what if it is just a police action? What if the Jedi *have* surrendered and are being taken into custody?"

He knew they'd never surrender. Every Jedi he'd known, from his mother on down, clung to the memory of the Order's near-extinction under Palpatine.

And when they defended his mother would be right at the heart of it, even at eighty-three years old. Very likely, she was already dead, but he hoped he'd arrived in time to save his sons.

He glanced at the tactical holo; the first wave of picket ships loyal to Veers had settled themselves among his destroyers. They held their fire now; the moment he launched fighters and landing craft they'd attack. *Invincible* and *Sentinel* lurched ever closer. The first wave of hostile TIE-X fighters were only minutes away.

His heart raced as he took out his comlink and thumbed it on. "Marasiah, do you copy?"

"Standing by," she said; crisp, succinct, so-military even now. She was in the cockpit of her TIE fighter, waiting to launch along with a half-dozen and over four hundred other pilots.

"We can't get any sensor readings from Ravelin. We have no idea what's going on at the Academy. Please, can you sense anything?"

"One moment," she said, and killed the connection. She'd drop into the Force to seek out far-off presence of the people below she knew and loved: her friends, her mother-in-law, her nephew, her sons. They could be captive or dead or fighting for their lives and Davek had no way to know.

Not until his wife spoke again.

When the attack came it came from nowhere. Vitor sensed no danger at all and the only warning was a shout from his grandmother two seconds before the first black-cloaked figure

jumped to block the alley mouth in front of them. Even then Vitor couldn't believe what was happening until a blood-red saber-blade extended from the Sith's fist.

And as he stared at those red blades, felt the alley walls constrict him and the rain patter on his head, he realized he *should* have seen this coming. He'd dreamed of it this very morning.

Sinde was fast; his lightsaber snapped and hissed to life. Flecks of light rain sizzled against his blade as he held it in a horizontal blocking position and stepped between the Sith and those he'd brought with him: Vitor, Jaina, Kagen Alar and his son Treis.

Vitor heard the slap of more boots on pavement and spun around; a second Sith had dropped in behind them, strapping them in the narrow space between two high warehouses.

Alar grabbed her lightsaber and ignited it. Vitor fumbled with his weapon; by the time it was lit the Sith were already on them. He could see little of their faces, only the black robes and heavy hoods, flashes of jawline underlit by sizzling red. Sinde blocked the first two blows from his attacker then swiped out offensively. Treis lurched for his father, even though the boy was too young to have made a lightsaber. Jaina grabbed him with the Force and pulled him to her. Alar struggled against the rain of fast, heavy blow. Vitor leaped to help, ducked underneath a broad horizontal swipe by the Sith and struck at its knees. The Sith jumped back two steps and Alar used the opening to press the attack. Vitor could feel the fear bleeding off the older apprentice but desperation made her reckless; her attacks were fast and uncontrolled, the opposite of how she'd sparred with him just a few eternal hours before.

Vitor sprung forward to help. In this narrow space there was little room to move around and the Sith was beaten back a few paces more. Their sabers clashed and criss-crossed and carved straight scars into the walls of the warehouses around them.

Then Vitor heard and scream felt agony in the Force. He spun around on instinct; the Sith had scored a blow across Sinde's torso, causing the knight to bend over at the waist in pain, saber-arm dangling at his side.

Treis scream but Jaina held him tight. The Sith lunged again; a blade of red light speared out through Sinde's back. When it withdrew his body collapsed, dead in the quickening rain.

The Sith who'd killed Sinde dashed for Jaina. Instinct took over; Vitor rushed for his grandmother. After one leaping stride he knew he'd be too late; nothing could stand in the way of the red blade now bearing down on her.

Then one wing of her bulky brown cloak furred back. Her arm shot up, faster than he'd seen it before, and a blue blade of light caught the Sith's right before it fell. The Sith froze, stunned; Vitor slid across the rain-slick pavement, slowing only a little as he held his blade out long in front of him, hoping to spear the Sith through the chest while it was distracted.

But the Sith jumped back, just barely avoiding his blade. Vitor wanted to press the attack but he heard a scream, spun around, and saw Alar, running back toward them, stumble and clutch the place where the second Sith's blade had cut deep and hot into her side. She stumbled, Vitor watched as his grandmother without even a gesture, picked the apprentice off her feet and pulled her close. Then they all stood together, backs to the warehouse wall, three trainees and one Master. Deir Sinde's lightsaber blazed in his son's hand; either Treis or Jaina had called it there, Vitor didn't know which. The old woman was smaller than any of the trainees and he instinctively moved to shield Jaina's body with his own.

The Sith, one on either side of them, hesitated for just a second. They stepped closer as one, then stopped just outside striking range. Vitor didn't understand; he could sense their evil intent in the Force and wondered if they were calling for help.

Then, as one, they raised their free hands and sent out two waves of sizzling Force lightning.

Treis hefted his father's lightsaber but could do nothing to stop the energy that wrapped around his blade and crackled all over his body. Alar, already wounded, only lasted a few seconds more before dropping her saber and collapsing to her knees in agony.

Vitor barely lasted longer. Pain burst on him from both sides, overwhelming his petty defenses, his senses, everything. He barely

managed to hold on to his saber but lost the strength to lift it; he opened his mouth to scream but couldn't hear anything for the pain boiling in his mind. It felt like his skull would burst.

Then he fell beside the other two apprentices; the cold wet stones were a weird relief. He landed on his side and rolled onto his back, looked up and saw the lightning converge on his grandmother from both directions.

Jaina had shut off her lightsaber. She let the lightning come and when it did it didn't touch her; it sparked and crackled in the air as though she'd raised an energy shield around herself. Through his pain and disbelief Vitor realized she'd done just that. When he blinked his eyes to focus he saw her face, eyes closed and restful, as though in quiet meditation.

Then the lightning dancing over her shield shot back out at those who'd produced it. Vitor was too weak to stand but he wrenched his body and arced his neck, skull rolling on the hard ground until he could see one Sith frozen in place, body set aglow by jolts of its own dark side energy.

He heard a lightsaber and looked back at his grandmother. Jaina had her weapon in both hands; with amazing speed the old woman lifted it up and blocked the second Sith's blow. By then the first had recovered was on her too, and Vitor was certain not even Jaina Solo Fel could withstand that.

But he was wrong. He knew, intellectually, that they'd once called his grandmother the Sword of the Jedi. That she'd been the Order's best duelist and most resolute fighter. That she'd slain a Yuuzhan Vong warmaster three times her size and too many Sith to count. To him, though, she'd always been a tiny white-haired old woman, a stern but loving mentor whose further deeds were only legend.

To move that fast Jaina had to be drawing on the Force, using her own frail body as a marionette moved by the universe's invisible flow. She blocked one red lightsaber, then another, then went back to her enemy, slipping her blade beneath its attack and poking the blue tip of her own into its gut. Then she spun, bent at the waist and ducked under the second Sith's strike. She popped up on her heels

to come up right in front of her attacker and wedged her saber into its torso. Then she tore up, splitting through neck and head, and just as fast she withdrew, turned around, stopped an awkward wild strike by the remaining Sith. Then she cut low and horizontal, taking it right above the hips and slicing the body in two.

When the fight was over she immediately sagged against the wall, a puppet with cut strings. Fighting the pain that still sparked through his body, Vitor rolled onto his stomach, pressed hands against the pavement, and pushed himself to his knees. He crawled on them to his grandmother, who was now sinking to the ground, too weak to stand.

"Grandma!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Grandma!"

She he crawled close and put his hands on her shoulders Alar gasped behind him, "Master, that was *incredible*."

The old woman's smile was slight, satisfied. "Knew I still had it... in me."

"Grandma!" Vitor shouted again. He couldn't help himself. He cupped her face with one hand and shook her head lightly.

"I'll be fine," Jaina muttered, faint against the increasingly hard pounding of the rain. "Just... Need to recharge."

Vitor heard a new sound; he only recognized it for what it was when he looked back and saw Treis Sinde collapsed on top of his father's body. The boy's body retched as he sobbed. Vitor knew there was nothing he could do for the younger apprentice, as much as he wished there was.

"Is it over?" Alar said as she sat upright and groped for her lightsaber, still clutching her side wound with her other hand.

As soon as she asked it Vitor felt a spike of dread. His grandmother's eyes, tried a second ago, popped open and she said, "No. We need to get back... as fast as we can."

He started, "Are they-"

"Yes." Jaina reached up and squeezed his hand. "More Sith. They're after the others."

Wrapped in the airtight silence of her cockpit, that tight familiar space, Marasiah found it easy to touch the Force and reach down

toward the planet below. She felt what she'd expected and hoped not to find: panic, pain, death. Jedi fighting Imperial stormtroopers, both sides horrified that it had come to this but desperate to survive.

She reached further. She needed to find her family. She found her mother-in-law first; Jaina Solo Fel was an old woman now, with a Force presence that was unmistakable but usually subdued. The Jaina that Marasiah felt was a flare of energy, unrestrained. She felt other presences mixing with it: dark, angry, intent, somehow very cold.

In the years since becoming a Jedi, Marasiah had heard so much about the Sith but she'd never *felt* one until now. She'd never felt it, but the dark side was unmistakable.

Then the flare died down, and for a second Marasiah was afraid Jaina had died. But the Sith presences she'd felt were gone; those two at least. The dark side still lingered down there. More Sith remained.

Marasiah clung to the fainter presence Jaina continued to project. For just a second the two womens' thoughts touched across the void. Marasiah's hand, resting in the lap of her black flight suit, contracted involuntarily. She felt a warm familiar grip that wasn't there: Vitor's. Then she felt his presence in the Force too: far away but distinct. She felt Roan too; somewhere else, possibly, and just as terrified, but still alive.

There was no telling for how long. When she could no longer feel Vitor's hand she lifted her own and flicked on the comm.

"Our sons are in danger," Marasiah said. "Your mother too."

It shouldn't have relieved him like it did. "They're alive? You're sure?"

"Yes. Other Jedi are dying, Davek. They're being killed."

"Stormtroopers."

"More. I felt *Sith*."

The word made his chest tightened. He knew what Sith had done in Senex-Juvex all those years ago. He'd half-suspected the Sith were behind the wild raiders' attacks. Somehow, stupidly, he'd

never expected them to be working with Veers. The man's evil had always been more obvious and more banal. He should have known better; Palpatine himself had been a Sith and of course his kind wouldn't leave the Empire alone.

"Understood," Davek said. "Stand by to launch."

The second the flicked off the comm Korak, hovering at his shoulder this whole time, said, "Admiral, are you sure about this?"

"The Jedi are being *killed* down there," Davek waved a hand at the planet below. "Other citizens almost certainly are too."

"If we launch TIEs and landing craft, Veers' men will shoot them down."

"They'll try. We'll defend our people."

Korak reached out, grabbed his shoulder. "Sir, we're talking about Imperial soldiers *killing* each other."

"People are already dying."

"But this-" he struggled for words. They were at the brink of something no one could wrap his mind around.

"Do you want to live in the kind of Empire Veers is making?" he told Korak. "This isn't just about my family. We have to choose what Empire we want, right now."

He realized the truth as he said it. For eighty-eight years the Empire had muddled on without its emperor, struggling for a direction with no one able to provide something absolute. His father had tried; he'd lived and died trying but the state he'd sought to make was still an Empire with an emperor, a crippled and questioning shadow of what it had once been.

There was only one way out, and only one answer to that question. He saw it clearly, felt revelation's awful weight, and knew what had to be done.

He marched over the comm station and asked for a broadcast to all ships. When the lieutenant gave him the signal he raised his voice.

"All ships, prepare to launch TIE fighters and landing craft on my order. Captains, keep your shields at full and prepare targeting solutions on the nearest hostile ship. All TIE fighters are to be weapons-free at launch." He knew the honorable, moral thing

would be to not fire unless fired on, but waiting for the first shot could cost crucial seconds and crucial lives. The hostile TIE fighters were within firing range of Davek's fleet but the bigger destroyers were a few minutes out of range; in that short time Davek could cripple or destroy all the hostile pickets before they did much damage.

Then the comm officer frowned and said, "Admiral, we're getting a hail from *Tempest*, top priority."

If Renwar wanted him now it had to be urgent; he told the other ships to stand by to attack then signaled the comm officer to chance freqs. When the new line clicked on he said, "Farl, make it fast."

For a drawn-out second there was no reply; then she spoke, voice heavy, and with her first sighing breath he knew what she'd say.

"Admiral Fel, I cannot countenance this action."

"Farl, we can't-"

"Corrien Veers is the elected Head of State. I won't fire on Imperials acting under orders from the legal government."

"Listen-"

"Sir, I can't let you start a war."

"The war's already started. People are dying on Bastion."

"Jedi, not our soldiers."

"*Both*. And those Jedi are born-Imperials. They're *patriots*. Dammit, we don't have time to argue."

"I'm sorry, sir." Her voice trembled just a little. "If you launch assault teams my ships will have no choice but to fire on yours."

He looked at the holo; Renwar's three destroyers were edging closer, out of the rear position he'd assigned them. In less than two minutes they'd be within firing range of Davek's main line. Five minutes after that *Invincible* would be ready to bring down everything it had.

Davek snapped his fingers; the comm lieutenant killed the transmission and Davek spun on Korak. "Get to tactical. Tell all ships *Tempest* and its flankers are now hostile targets."

His jaw dropped. "But Renwar-"

"Do it, Captain! Have *Maelstrom* and *Conqueror* turn around and prepare to engage her ships. Comm! Get me a line to all ships *except* Renwar's!"

The lieutenant's hands shook as he worked the console. Korak hurried for the tactical station. Turning two destroyers to brawl with Renwar's three was all he'd be able to manage; once *Sentinel* got close to the battle their ships and their crews might be forfeit.

Assuming they chose to fight for him. Assuming anyone did. He'd trusted Renwar implicitly because she was a Voidwalker, the same reason Major Briggs had trusted his old sergeant. Malkin had clearly been loyal to Veers from the start; Renwar had just broken under the weight of her conscience. They were different but the same; friends turned enemies in a broken Empire.

There would be a lot more of that soon.

He glanced out the viewport at the planet below, at the drift of clouds that obscured his mother, his sons, the city where he'd grown up. "All loyal ships, this Admiral Fel," he began. "You have your orders from a minute ago. Every word still stands.

"All fighters and landers away. All ships-" he took a breath, then stepped over the edge. "Open fire."

And he watched from the front of the bridge as hundreds of TIEs and assault shuttles began to gush out toward the planet below. The deck shuddered softly beneath his feet as distant guns thundered to life. Far away explosions sparked, the first fires of an Empire at war with itself.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was arrangement none of them were comfortable with: not the Jedi, not the Sith, not the Alliance soldiers who'd been dragged into a situation they hadn't expected and could never understand. The vermin troops and the Jedi didn't object to the agreement reached between Darth Avanc and Grand Master Lowbacca, at least not when the Sith could hear. For the same reasons Darth Terrid waited until they had a small scrap of privacy to make his opinions known.

Per the agreement, they would take the Alliance troop transport and *Jade Shadow*, fly over to the ruins, and deploy there. The Erath shuttle the Sith had taken would remain on the field where it was. On the list of objectionable things about this mission that was low on the list. Darth Kheykid's *Intruder* remained high above, orbiting at the exact opposite side of the planet as the Alliance warship and Serissa Lohr was aboard. The girl had objected to staying back at first, but Avanc had insisted that one of the Jedi might recognize her as the late Princess of Hapes, at which point her use to the Sith would be ended.

Avanc had agreed to go with the team aboard *Jade Shadow*. He'd be the only Sith on that ship; Terrid and Kheykid would go aboard the Alliance transport along with a full platoon of armed

soldiers and the Jedi Grand Master. Darth Kheykid was the most deadly fighter in the One Sith, but even with Terrid's help he could never handle so much on his own. Before they split Terrid drew Avanc aside with an insistent nudge in the Force.

They stepped away from both ships and stood among waist-high grass. The sun beat hard on their black cloaks, drawing sweat to both their faces, and salt-tinted wind brought no relief.

"Say your piece quickly, Darth Terrid," the Keshiri didn't bother hiding his annoyance. "We shouldn't show delay or dissension in front of the Jedi."

"You've put us in a position of weakness."

"We were in that position the moment the Alliance cruiser dropped over our heads. *Before* that. Against Abeloth we'll never have the advantage."

"We cannot trust the Jedi."

"Of course not. They'll be expecting betrayal from us as well."

"By splitting us up you've made us even weaker."

Avanc gave a tired sigh, the same sigh he'd made long ago when frustrated with his young Chiss apprentice. It made Terrid feel condescended to. "The Jedi will feel slightly more comfortable with us divided. They'll think it won't be safe for us to turn on them and they'll be right. Darth Terrid, you are to work *with* the Jedi in all things until we've properly eliminated Abeloth."

"From what I've heard that's next to impossible. If Luke Skywalker and Lord Krayt could barely end her what hope do we have?"

"You've seen the old Duros female?"

He thought a moment. "Yes."

"She is carrying something on her back in a sealed, rectangular case. I am nearly certain her name is Ohali Soroc and she is one of ten Quest Knights Luke Skywalker sent to find a Force-imbued weapon he believed would kill Abeloth forever. If that is Soroc then she's almost certainly brought her weapon."

"I've never heard of these 'Quest Knights.'"

"You're not privy to all the One Sith know about the Jedi," Avanc said flatly. "She'll be with you aboard the troop transport."

Keep close. Watch her. *Protect* her and keep her safe from Abeloth and her followers. Tell Kheykid this also."

"If she's the only one who can kill Abeloth why are *you* going on the other ship?"

"Because my team will aim to scout and gather information rather than kill Abeloth. I know more about that abomination than either of you. Besides, I didn't want to put you together with your former friends."

Terrid scowled. "Did the girl tell you?"

"Serissa told us nothing. I know who you were, Darth Terrid. I know who *they* are, both of them. Whatever accounts you have to settle you can do it later. Right now you need to be separate and focused on Abeloth."

Avanc's reasons were all dispassionate and practical. Terrid knew he'd made the right choices, but they still *felt* wrong. All his life he'd been told that being a Sith meant using the Force to break your chains, dominate your enemy, and in doing so dominate the universe and wrest your will from it. What Avanc was ordering them to do went against every tenant of his indoctrination; it was something a Jedi would do.

"I know what you're thinking, Darth Terrid," Avanc warned. "There will be time to settle with the Jedi *after* she is dead."

"Abeloth can be a weapon. We can use her against the Jedi."

"My people tried that once and lost everything. No. We work with the Jedi now. By all means, don't risk your life to save one of theirs. Let them and the vermin soldiers take the brunt of her attacks. But do not hurt or hinder them until Abeloth is eliminated. This is not just my order, this is the will of Darth Krayt. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said, "And I will obey."

He didn't bother to hide his bitterness and anger in the Force. Avanc wouldn't respect him if he did. As it was the Keshiri gave him a short nod, turned, and marched through the grass toward *Jade Shadow*. Neither Jodram nor Jade were outside and visible. Terrid was glad for that and he knew Avanc was right about one

thing at least. He couldn't afford to be distracted by either of them now.

He turned from that familiar ship and started toward the Alliance troop hauler, where a dozen armed soldiers and Darth Kheykid were waiting.

Jade Shadow and the larger Alliance transport flew in low over the ruined towers. Jade was back in the co-pilot's seat, Ayen Qemar at the helm. Flat fields of green tall grass, interspersed with copses of gnarled trees, passed beneath. The half-sunken towers grew large in front of them. They seemed to be molded out of some smooth silver material Jade didn't recognize. Unlike durasteel plates there seemed to be no joints or welds that marked their construction, and despite the salty air there was no sign of rust. Age was visible by the vines and mosses that climbed high from bases half-sunk into the swamp. Several structures were already partially submerged in the ocean that must have been gradually encroached on these ruins for centuries, maybe millennia.

Even with the sights in front of them it was hard not to glance behind them at the black-robed and armed Sith Lord standing beside Jodram at the back of the cockpit. Darth Avanc was watching the same sights they were, and as Qemar brought them close to one slanting tower he said, "These designs are not Rakatan."

After a second's awkward silence, Jodram asked, "You sure about that?"

"Very. The Sith have experience with Rakatan technology."

"You're going to have to tell us all about this experience once this is over."

"You can try to pry out secrets from my mind, Jedi, but I'll kill you before you succeed."

"You can't take everyone on this ship."

"Enough," Jade said firmly.

Darth Avanc snorted. "I took no offense. Your husband is trying to assure himself we haven't broken him."

Before Jodram could argue- or do something worse- Jade sent him a wordless message: *not kriffing now*.

He got it loud and clear and with effort forced his attention back out the viewport. "So if it's not Rakata, who *do* you think made these things?"

Avanc hummed thoughtfully. "Do you not think it's strange, this world existing so far detached from other systems in the galaxy?"

"There are other stray star clusters out there," Qemar said.

"Yes, but a single star, alone, with only a single planet? That seems unlikely."

"But not impossible," said Jodram.

"No. Only very suspect, the same way as, for example, the Corellian system."

"You think Celestials made all this?" Jade asked.

"Perhaps. What is a Celestial? A name we give for whoever engineered great stellar feats before any modern sentient race walked the stars."

There was more to the Celestials than just that, Jade knew. According to what her father and grandfather has told her, Abeloth *was* a Celestial, or at least some mortal sentient who'd tried to acquire their powers. In doing so she'd become as endless as them but also a monster, mindlessly groping to reclaim the family she'd lost.

If this world really was a Celestial construct, then it made all the more sense that Abeloth be here. After all her possessed mortal bodies had been destroyed fifty years ago, perhaps this was where her soul- or whatever one called her Force-based essence- recovered after being beaten by Luke and Darth Krayt in whatever shadow realm they'd fought it. Fifty years was a long time for humans but to her it was nothing. For millennia, she knew, Abeloth had been imprisoned by the Celestials in a jungle world hidden in the Maw. Something similar in this world may have caused her to re-materialize here.

Qemar said, "Sensors are picking up more shuttles."

"Erath ships," Avanc muttered as he leaned over Jade's shoulder for a better look. Jodram shouldered him back, which the Sith Lord took with a condescending smile.

Jade saw them too, though. While much of these ancient ruins were being swallowed by the sea, parts further back emerged from the grass and tangled brush. In addition to high towers there were some large silver discs of the same material that sat atop the swamp. Blocky Erath shuttles sat atop them, but no figures seemed to be moving under the sun.

"Life signs?" asked Jodram.

The Nautolan checked her sensors. "Nothing in the ships."

"Look," Jade pointed, "You can see portals in the center of the discs. They probably lead underground."

"Just where I wanted to go," Jodram muttered.

"I'm getting signals for one more ship, further out," Qemar said. "Let me pull back and take a look."

Jade Shadow rose higher above the ruins, and while Jade commed Colonel Horn's troop carrier to tell him about what they'd found, Qemar took them out further from the ocean, away from the ruins and over more tangled swampland.

"Why would a shuttle land out here?" Jodram asked.

"I don't know, but sensors are picking up familiar metallic compounds. Wait a minute... I think I've found it."

As *Jade Shadow* lowered over the swamp and Jade looked around. "I don't see anything."

"There." Avanc stabbed a finger forward. Jade followed it and saw the glint of metal peeking through a patch of gnarled trees. Then she noticed what seemed to be a straight slice through the forest, partially overtaken by new growth.

"I think this thing has been here for a little while," Jade muttered.

"I think so to," said Qemar as she brought them low over what looked to be crashed ship. The design was the same as the Erath shuttles they'd just seen but this one appeared to have been here significantly longer.

"We should investigate," Avanc said.

"We?" Jodram put a hand on his lightsaber.

"Yes, *we*. I'm going out and you can send however many Jedi you want to watch over my shoulder."

"He's right," Jade said, rising from her seat. "We'll go. Ayen, put this ship into a hover right over the crash site so we can drop down."

Reluctantly, Jodram nodded assent. When they went down to *Jade Shadow's* cargo bay he lowered the landing ramp. Hot air swirled up into the hold. Avanc went down the ramp first, black cloak whipping behind him, and jumped casually off the edge. He fell ten meters straight down and landed boots-first on the back of the ship.

Jade and Jodram went down after him and used the Force to soften their fall. Behind them came the healer Ranto and Nek Charrik, a Shistaven wolfman whose temperament was less fierce than his looks. The Sith Lord didn't act bothered to be outnumbered four-to-one. He climbed the back of the ship, ignited his lightsaber, and cut a hole through the roof of the cockpit. He dropped down before the Jedi could reach him, but when Jade looked down through the hole he seemed to have clipped his lightsaber back onto his belt. While Ranto and Charrik stayed outside, Jade and Jodram dropped into the hole to join Avanc in the cramped space.

The Keshiri Sith had already moved over to the aft hold. The cockpit itself seemed empty. As a crash site, Jade had expected to find bodies inside, still strapped to their seats and long-decayed. The air of the cockpit was hot and stale but there was no death-reek. There was no death, no bodies anywhere. She followed Avanc into the hold. A few stray belongings, unfamiliar for their Erath design, were strewn on benches. Avanc walked over back to the airlock portal on the ship's port flank and checked it.

"They likely exited through here," he called. "I'm sure they tried to make their way for the ruins after that. That's where they would have found Abeloth."

"How long has this thing been here?" asked Jodram as he stepped out of the cockpit.

"It's hard to tell," admitted Avanc. "I suspect plants grow fast in this climate."

"I can make a guess," said Jade. "Say, two to three years. That's when Abeloth took over the Erath."

Jodram asked, "So what do you think? This is some kind of scout ship? If that's the case maybe they crashed here, then sent a distress signal, called *more* of their people to pick them up..."

"And this is how Abeloth reached the Erath homeworld," said Avanc.

"They say she took over two Erath bodies, one male, one female. Do you they were from this ship?"

"Those bodies must be very powerful in the Force for her to sustain her so long," Avanc said. Jade didn't like the Sith being so knowledgeable, even if they'd gotten his facts the same way the Jedi had. "More likely she killed most of the crash survivors, possessed one body, then occupied it long enough to get to the Erath world, where she found better hosts. I imagined she crashed this ship herself as well."

The *how* of Abeloth's return was falling into awful place, but Jade didn't know how it would help them defeat her. Her night-queen body must have been somewhere on this planet and Jade only hoped she wasn't strong enough to begin possessing more. For all they knew, she'd already begun.

"Okay," Jade said, "Let's get back to the ruins. If we're going to find her, it'll be there."

It was easy enough to set *Jade Shadow* down on the same disc-shaped platform the Erath shuttles had taken. They commed Colonel Horn's ship before setting down and told him the rest, and the colonel had reported that they'd found another collection of landing discs and had just set down. Like *Jade Shadow*, they'd met no resistance.

That didn't fill Jodram with confidence. Between Abeloth, Terrid, and this infuriatingly confident Darth Avanc, there was nothing he liked about this mission. Even Jade, whose presence he'd normally treasure, shouldn't have been here.

When they landed everyone but Ayen Qemar disembarked the *Shadow*. Darth Avanc was first down the landing ramp, though the

fierce-looking Nev Charrik shadowed right behind him, lightsaber already drawn.

As he and Jade left the ship, Jodram sidled close and asked in a low voice, hoping the Sith wouldn't hear, "What happened to Nat and Kol? Did you leave them on Fengrine?"

She shook her head. "Ossus. Allana will take care of them."

That made Jodram feel a tiny bit better. If their sons had to grow up without blood parents at least Allana would make sure they'd grow up as good, strong Jedi knights.

Stop that, Jade warned through their Force-bond.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I wish you'd stay back at the ship with Ayen."

"Ranto says I'm fine." He didn't *feel* fine, not after what he'd gone through while imprisoned, but he felt good enough to fight if he had to. After all that had happened there was no way he'd let Jade walk into these ruins in search of Abeloth, especially with this suspiciously well-behaved Sith among them.

At least Darth Terrid was with the other group. It was the only mercy this mission allowed.

"We'll both get through this. Together," Jade whispered.

"Do you really believe that?"

She touched him through the Force, with the bond they'd had since they were children. That bond had been the constant of both their lives, seeing them through loss and gain. Through it he felt her sincerity, and like so much that was hers it became his own without his even willing it.

Darth Avanc kept his lightsaber on his belt as he walked down the steps, into the ancient ruin. Nek Charrik was right behind him, blue saber burning, while Elin Ranto turned on a glowlamp and cast it ahead.

They didn't need it for long. The landing discs had been raised above the natural growth that was swallowing these ruins but beneath it the structures became tangled with high grass and brush. Gnarled vines and sheets of moss climbed the walls of what seemed to be a collection of tunnels joined by low-arched gates. Daylight

fell through half-collapsed roofs. They stepped lightly through the undergrowth and scattered rubble.

"Remember, we're having a look around," Jade told them. "If we think she's close we call the Grand Master and he'll bring his team."

Ranto checked his comlink. "Signal's still working."

"I'm in communication with my people as well," Darth Avanc said without checking a comm. Communication with the Force, then. Another brag.

"Does anyone feel anything?" Jade asked as they started to spread out among the crumbled arches.

"I feel kind of terrified," muttered a young human knight. Krais, Jodram recalled. "But no. No Abeloth."

"*What* does she feel like?" asked Ranto.

"If she doesn't want you to feel her you won't," Avanc said. "But when she does—"

"Allana called it a tentacle of *need*," Jodram supplied.

"You fought that thing when it possessed Master Saar," Charrik said. "What did it feel like then?"

"Nothing. Master Saar's body was like a puppet. Abeloth was this... energy animating it, but it didn't feel like anything I can describe."

"Great," Krais sighed. "So what do we do now? Where do we go?"

"Should we split up into teams?" Ranto suggested.

Jade shook her head. "We stay together for now."

"You don't have to be concerned on my account," Avanc said, so civil. Jodram wanted to smack him.

"I wasn't concerned about you," Jade said coldly. "Just Abeloth."

Avanc nodded, as though her answer were satisfactory. Jodram tore his thoughts off the Sith and stayed close to his wife. Only Charrik and two more knights had their sabers alive. Avanc was taking slow steps and he moved among the broken arches, head high, always looking in every direction.

These ruins could go take days to cover on foot, even if they split up. Still, they pressed onward. After almost an hour of searching they found a place where the ground had crumbled away,

leaving a great pit big enough to drop a TIE fighter into. Though sunlight fell into the pit it didn't seem to illuminate anything inside; there was only darkness.

"I don't like the look of this," Kraus muttered.

"Neither do I," said Jodram. "We need to keep investigating other places. Mark this spot for later."

"I'll call the other team and give them an update," Ranto suggested.

"Do that," Jade said. "I think we should-"

Suddenly a chorus of screams filled the air. Bodies fell from the tunnels' crumbling rooftops, through the sunlit gaps and into the ground strewn with rubble and brush. They popped to their feet almost instantly: warriors in dark bodysuits with black hair like billowing clouds and bulging multifaceted eyes like insects. They held curved sabers in either hand and, still screaming, flung themselves at the Jedi.

Jodram acted on instinct. When one lunged at his wife he stepped between them and swung his saber in a horizontal sweep. It took the Erath through the midsection and dropped the body to the grass in two halves. As Jade's back bumped against his two more came at them from either side. They shifted, minds and bodies acting as one. Jodram struck out with his saber again and sheared through both the Erath's swords. It made no attempt to stop and kept coming, aiming the stumps of its blades for the Jedi's stomach. He shifted his blade and took the alien right through the chest; only then did it go limp.

Jade, for her part, didn't even ignite her saber. She'd trained with it, could use it as well as anyone else, but like their long-dead Master Mjalu, she did anything to avoid the blade. Her natural Force power, the kind Jodram could only envy, did the rest. She picked her attacker up with the strength of her mind and held him two meters in the air, under a shaft of sunlight. She plucked the swords from its hands and tossed them into the great black pit. Then she pushed the body up through the hole in the roof and hurled it out of sight.

The other Jedi did their best to fight the Erath nonlethally, but in the end Jodram had to kill another, Charrik two more, and Kraiss three. More Erath were disarmed and the Jedi had to break their limbs to stop them from attacking. Darth Avanc had no moral qualms: he cut the heads of three Erath with his lightsaber, blasted two more with Force lightning, and hurled a third, screaming, into the deep pit. After a silence of almost five full seconds they heard the crunch of impact far below.

"Is everyone okay?" Jade called.

"One wounded," Ranto reported, hands over the bloodstained thigh of an Itorian knight struggling to stand.

"You Jedi are fools," Avanc said, sneering down at one of the crippled Erath. "You risk your own lives because you're afraid to kill vermin."

"None of our people were killed," Jade said. "And any death is a tragedy."

"The tragedy is that you've willingly blinded yourself to the Force's true potential." Avanc's red saber buzzed inches from the Erath's frightened face. "These creatures are just puppets for Abeloth."

"Don't kill it," Jodram stepped forward, saber still ignited.

"You expect to learn something from it?"

"These Erath are Abeloth's victims, just like anyone else."

Avanc shrugged and shut off his saber. "There's no reason for us to fight at the moment."

Jodram didn't shut off his. "I'm so glad we agree."

"That's enough," Jade said. "We need to keep moving. Elin, call Lowbacca. Tell him what happened."

As the Advosze got out his comm Jade stepped up to the fallen Erath. She, Jodram, and Avanc all looked down at the prone form. Even with broken legs it lashed out at the Force-users hovering around it.

"It's not possessed by Abeloth," Jade said. "Not like Master Saar was. I can feel its mind. It's frantic, scared—"

"But still a shred of its soul remains," Avanc shook his head in disgust. "It would be a mercy to kill it. You know I'm right."

"Once we get rid of Abeloth we'll decide what can be done for her minions. Not now."

The Sith gave her a look Jodram didn't like. It was too approving. "You take charge of a situation well. Yet I've been told you've shown no desire to lead the Jedi Order like your father and grandfather. Why is that?"

"Told by whom?" Jodram asked. His lightsaber still buzzed in his hand.

"Common knowledge," he shrugged. "Why else would you have spent most of the past decade raising your sons on an irrelevant farming planet?"

Jade stared at him hard. "We'll go over all that once we've taken care of Abeloth. And a lot of other things too."

"I look forward to it." Avanc glanced at Jodram's blade. "Is there really a need for that *now*?"

"No, I guess not." Jodram admitted and shut it off. His wife was correct, as usual. They needed to calm their heads and focus on the task ahead. If they did encounter Abeloth herself in these overgrown catacombs they needed to face her as one; even then they'd probably struggle to hold her off until backup arrived with the Morath Dagger. And to do that they'd have to rely not on Darth Avanc's Sith savagery but on the immense, innate power Jade held within herself.

Power you'll never know, a voice said. It said what he'd long known but it was not his own.

He glanced at Jade. She didn't seem to have sent it, but it had spoken inside his mind the same way they'd spoken to each other's thoughts since their apprentice years.

He opened his mouth to ask her about it, but the air filled with screams again. Four more Erath fanatics fell from the ceiling. One of them, maybe the one Jade had thrown away, didn't even have blades. That one lunged straight for Jodram's wife and he was there to intercept. He slowed it with the Force, giving him enough time to ignite his saber. Then he swept low, cutting the creature's legs off at the knees.

The others went right for Jade and Avanc. The Sith Lord fired lightning from one hand and ignited his saber. Jade, with a flash of reluctance, ignited her own violet weapon. One savage Erath charged her and she raised one hand to repel it.

Then the crippled one at her feet reached out and grabbed both her legs. She kicked back, tried to kick free, but the creature held firm. Jodram lurched for them but Avanc was already there; he flicked his lightsaber in a vertical strike and cleaved the Erath through the chest.

Its dead hands released Jade instantly. She stumbled back, so close to the crumbling edge of the pit. Jodram tried to grab her with the Force but the Erath, already in midair, collided with her, feet against chest. The alien screamed but Jade didn't make a sound as she toppled back and fell into the black.

Jodram threw himself to the edge of the pit. By the time he fell on its rim he saw nothing besides black. He reached out to sense his wife and found her, but so distant he couldn't reach her. He heard the crunch of another body hitting the ground far below, but only once.

Are you hurt? he sent down to his wife.

I'm okay. Her mind touched his back.

Stay there. I'll come help you.

No. I'll be alright.

I won't leave you.

You're not. I can sense Lowbacca's team. They're not far from where I am. Just go, Jodram.

"She is still alive," Darth Avanc observed.

Jodram rolled onto his back and looked up at the Sith. "Sense it, can you?"

"Yes, actually. In any case I knew Luke Skywalker's granddaughter could never die so easily."

He pushed himself to his feet. "I'll be sure to relay the compliment once we find her."

Jodram, please, Jade spoke to his mind. *Just keep going. I can handle myself.*

"You're communicating with your wife," Avanc said.

"Do you know what we're saying?" Jodram scowled at him.

"No. But I can imagine."

"She says we're going ahead to search for Abeloth. She'll meet up with Lowbacca's team."

"That's exactly what I supposed."

"Great. Now shut up for a while."

Avanc inclined his head and gave a wordless smile. Jodram want to snap his saber back on and use it right now, but Jade soothed his mind. *Don't let him rattle you. Just keep your mind on Abeloth and keep moving.*

I know, he sent back. I love you.

I love you too. See you soon.

Then their mental link, slightly strained across this distance, softly broke. Jodram put a hand on his lightsaber hilt, looked Avanc in the eye, and said, "Let's get moving."

Again, the Sith Lord nodded.

Beneath the landing pads the ruins became choked with vines and overgrowth. Going deeper the sunlight was swallowed up and they wandered through dark tunnels linked by low arches, always stretching out with the Force and finding nothing.

Despite that, Abeloth was here. Darth Terrid knew it. They all did. On Lowbacca's orders they split up the group into three. There were so many Alliance troopers with them there was more than enough manpower. Kheykid went with one group, Terrid another. The Grand Master stayed with the Barabel, surely to fight against him if needed. It was a battle Terrid would have liked to see but instead he was sent into deeper, lower tunnels, accompanied mostly by a full squadron of Alliance commandos. They let him lead the way, rifles always raised, ready to shoot him before anything else. Terrid didn't blame them and didn't give them cause to fire. He pressed ahead, using his saber to clear away the dried roots that increasingly broke through cracks in the arched tunnel ceiling.

As they marched through the interminable ruins, Darth Avanc's mind reached out to Terrid's. He spoke not with a voice but with a cascade of images, impressions. The Chiss suddenly knew

that Jade Skywalker had been separated from the rest of the search party from *Jade Shadow*. She was alone but going to meet Lowbacca. With that knowledge came a warning: Do not try to kill her.

Terrid had intended nothing of the kind. As they'd crawled deeper into these tunnels his worries about his two former friends had been stripped away. Abeloth was here, she was close, he *knew* it without knowing how, and that mattered more than Jade and Jodram ever could. That Avanc felt it necessary to remind him was both distracting and insulting.

"What's wrong, Sith?" a voice said behind him.

Terrid turned and looked into the glare of the front-most commando's rifle-mounted glowlamp. "Nothing's wrong," he said.

"Then keep moving, Sith!"

He had a harsh bark, but he was terrified. They all were; those commandos were a beacon of fear. They'd been brought along on an ostensible mercy mission in uncharted space, only to be thrown as fodder to a horror their minds could never comprehend. Terrid almost pitied the vermin.

He began stepping forward again, using his lightsaber to cleave through more dried, tangled roots. The glowlamps shining past his shoulder revealed the path ahead: more dark tunnels and low arches. It seemed like they would go on forever.

Then he heard the first scream. The soldiers with the glowlamps spun around and Terrid followed their light. He saw nothing but the carved-up tunnel through which they'd come but heard another scream, quickly silence, and saw another soldier collapse. Then another scream, and another, and bodies fell like dominoes. Terrid hefted his lightsaber to defend but he still couldn't see what was attacking. A few soldiers, panicked, fired shots into the dark that only scorched the tunnel walls. Terrid watched one body after another twist and fall. Heads snapped hard to one side or another. Armor crunched as though under an invisible fist, collapsing inward and imploding bodies. One after another, they fell.

And when the last trooper died she was on him. Black hair trailed her like a cloak of night as she jumped over the bodies and

landed feet-first on his chest, throwing him back. The Sith summoned his anger immediately and threw out a blaze of Force-lightning. The current jumped around Abeloth's body, effortlessly deflected. A hand shot up and grabbed him by the throat. His body was lifted from its feet and thrust hard against the thick roots behind him. They stabbed into his back as he shifted the lightsaber in his free hand to cleave off her arm.

Instead her second hand shot up and held his lightsaber between them. She lifted her head, throwing back night-black hair so he could see her face. The lightsaber's glow cast the rainbow sheen of her face in a sickly red. Where there should have been the bulbous multi-faceted eyes common to Erath there were only two scorched-black pits. He stared at those black pits until he thought he saw, somehow, a twinkle of starlight at their very depths. His smile stretched wide, revealing rows of tiny black teeth.

He waited for her hand to squeeze and crush his throat, but it did not.

"Do it, witch," he choked. "*Do it!*"

The smile stayed wide; her lips did not move. A whisper in his head, soft and feminine, said, *It's been some time since I looked into a Sith's eyes.*

Strangely, despite his situation, he felt gratified. Staring at death, staring at the abyss of her scorched-blind eyes, he realized why. All these years he'd never truly known what he was. Never a normal Chiss, never a normal Jedi. For so long he'd never known if he was really a Sith either, or if the things he'd been as a child had corrupted him from the way of true strength.

But the Night-queen's eyes saw truth. He was a Sith in the end. He wished he could have been more. He *should* have been more. Always he'd stood apart, always trying to be more than those around him. To die here, pathetically- throat crushed or soul sucked away by this abomination- didn't feel him with fear or sadness. It made him rage.

"Do it," he rasped. Blue lightning sparked from his body; from his hands, his arms, shoulders, from the skin on his face and his sweat-matted hair. His entire body began to burn with the dark side

from within. Rage came so easily, the most natural emotion he'd ever known.

You are not afraid? Abeloth asked. No; it was a statement.

Lightning joined his body to hers. It sparked, danced, but did nothing to harm her. Suddenly she dropped him. He fell to the ground; his lightsaber rolled across the dirt and one hand went instinctively to his raw throat but rage did not go away. He tried to call the saber to his hand but it stayed exactly where it was, unresponsive. He looked up at the Night-queen and saw her standing over him, a single finger pointed at his saber, casually locking it in place.

"Do you want my body, witch?" Terrid gasped. "Is that it?"

She bent close, as though examining his face with the scorched ruin of her eyes. *There are more of your kind here. I can feel them. Sith... and Jedi.*

"Is that what you want? You want me to lead you to Jedi?"

She nodded, and that smile seemed to grow impossible wider.

Abeloth was letting him shamelessly barter for his life, but it didn't feel that way. This was what he'd told Avanc they should have done from the start. No more hiding, no more sulking. To a true Sith everything was a tool. Even Abeloth could be a weapon against the Jedi.

But she knew how he felt. Of course she did. That's why she gave him this offer in the first place.

She might yet kill him or take his body. Either of those things was likely, but if he could have a short span more of life- and another chance to wreak *some* damage as a Sith should- he could only take it.

"I'll get you your Jedi," Darth Terrid growled, and somehow that smile got even wider.

Jade wasn't sure how long she spent wandering through the dark. She'd brought a glowlamp along and used it to shine her way through the low, dark tunnels, many of which she had to creep through at a crouch. No more Erath appeared to stop her and she kept on reaching out with the Force, distantly sensing Jodram with

the rest of his team and also feeling Lowbacca with his own group not far away. *How* far away she couldn't tell, but Lowbacca was aware of her, and she did her best to trace the path through the convoluted darkness to his location.

When the constricted tunnels finally fell away and she found a cleared it took her by surprise. A single beam of light fell from the darkness above, through a cracked hole in the ten-meter-high ceiling dome, though she knew they were far deep underground and there was no way the sun should have been able to reach them.

Light landed on a shallow pool. In this breezeless cavern it was mirror-still. As she stepped close she caught a whiff of some sulfurous smell and wondered if this water might be seeped up from some spring deeper within the planet. When she reached the rim of the pool she noticed that, rather than a natural welling of water, it seemed to be set within in artificial basin.

After wandering for so long on the hot surface of this planet she was thirsty, but she had no desire to drink. She crouched on her knees and leaned closer. She saw her own reflection with a faint silver sheen. She reached out, haltingly, to touch, but held her fingertips a few centimeters above the water.

Instead she withdrew her hand, grasped the rim firm, and bent a little closer. Softly, she blew on its surface. The water rippled and so did her reflection. When the water stilled her image had changed. She saw herself as an older woman, by perhaps ten or twenty years, with light streaks in her hair and heavier lines in her face. She reached out and touched her cheek but it felt smooth and familiar, without the creases and jowls she was seeing.

Then she understood. Her father had told her about a grotto and a shallow pool on Abeloth's home planet in the Maw. On this world they'd found a place called the Pool of Knowledge, and in its waters Ben, Luke, and Jacen Solo before them had seen visions of the future.

This world was far, far from the Maw. Her father had told her it was a jungle, not a swamp, and he'd made no mention of colossal ruined towers of alien design. This was not the same planet, but it was *similar*. She suspected Darth Avanc was right; whoever the

Celestials had been, this was another planet they'd deeply left their mark on. Whatever Force-power they'd used, echoes remained on both worlds. Likely that was why Abeloth's essence, crippled after its fight with her grandfather and Darth Krayt, had rematerialized here on the far side of the galaxy.

She blew on the Pool's surface again. Ripples played across it and suddenly her face was gone. Instead Jade saw a vision of her cousin Allana. She wore a white gown and was seated on a white throne. Around her beings from dozens of special, gathered like old friends and looking admiringly at the red-haired woman. Jade looked more closely and saw two figures in Jedi robes on either side of Allana. One was Jodram, the other was her. She looked her current age in this vision; so did Jodram and Allana.

It was, she realized, the same vision her grandfather had seen almost fifty years ago. The Lost Tribe of the Sith, Darth Avanc's people, had seen this vision too and launched a hunt for their so-called Jedi Queen that had nearly claimed Allana's life.

Jade understood this vision wasn't meant to be literal. There was no real throne. It was a metaphor for the state of the galaxy. She'd heard Allana ponder whether this vision- the one her father Jacen had done hideous things and died to bring about- was fulfilled when she'd taken her leadership position in the Galactic Alliance. Jade wanted to think so; it meant that, even after Allana had stepped down after twelve years on the job, the peace she'd preserved had been protected. This was still a galaxy at peace, and from this vision before her, Jade and Jodram were its protectors.

A familiar mind touched hers. She stayed where she was, kneeling over the pool, gazing at this vision of a galaxy at peace, and reached back to touch it. She told Lowbacca to hasten to her. She told him there was something he needed to see.

As they went deeper into those dark places beneath the surface of the planet, whispers kept playing in Jodram's mind, so faint he could barely make out their message. He was sure he was the only one hearing them, which was bad enough, but if it wasn't Jade

speaking to him like she usually did there was only one option, and that was worst of all.

Run, Jedi, Abeloth whispered to him sometimes.

Fear me, she said at others.

Mostly she said nothing at all. They continued pressing into the dark to the sound of their own footsteps, and lightsabers cutting their way through the tangle of roots and growths that clogged these tunnels. Darth Avanc led the way, never showing hesitation when they came to a branch in the path. None of them could sense Abeloth ahead but the Sith insisted he felt *something*, very faint and distance, but still present. Jodram didn't want to trust him but as the others would feel nothing at all they let him guide them deeper down. Perhaps the Sith was better attuned to Abeloth's Dark Side presence. Perhaps he was after something else, though Jodram had no idea what, as the only two Sith on the planet were securely watched by Lowbacca's team of Jedi, and he knew he'd have felt it in the Force if something major had happened to them.

As Avanc announced he saw what looked like an open space ahead, Abeloth whispered, louder than before, *Turn and run, Jedi. You know you desire it.*

"Shut the kark up," he whispered aloud.

Nek Charrik, right ahead of him, stopped and looked back. Jodram shook his head, urging the Shistavenen Jedi on.

You are weak, Abeloth continued in his mind. *You will never be as strong as your wife. You will never be a Skywalker. You will always fail those you love.*

It took all Jodram's strength not to bark aloud again. Somehow she knew exactly how to hurt him. She touched on his deepest insecurities, the ones he'd tried to hide even from Jade all these years.

If a Skywalker couldn't kill me, what do you think you can do? she said. *You are nothing. You will live and die having done nothing but add your weak admixture to the Skywalker blood. Be satisfied with that and go.*

She was right. His family had never produced great Jedi. His father, to be sure, was a loyal one, but never the most powerful. His

grandmother had fumbled her way to knighthood late in life. His aunt had failed to become one at all. He'd weakened the Skywalker line, not strengthened it, and he had no chance of killing Abeloth himself.

But because she was telling him this, he couldn't turn back. Giving in, doing what Abeloth wanted of him, would be the worst failure of all.

Darth Avanc led them into a circular chamber with a low domed ceiling. Even before Jodram slipped inside he heard hacking coughs from the Jedi ahead. When the stench of death assaulted his nostrils he pressed his nose into his sleeve and tried to stifle it. The chamber was strewn with skeletons; humanoid, probably Erath. They were mostly piled around the edges, leaving the center floor clean, but there must have been two dozen of them. A shaft of sunlight fell through a hole at the top of the dome, leaving a white circle in the middle while soft ambient light displayed the tattered clothing and scraps of decaying flesh that clung to white bone.

"What is this?" Elin Ranto said, voice muffled by his palm.

"The crew from the crashed shuttle, possibly," Avanc looked closer. His face was scrunched for the stench but unlike the Jedi he didn't deign to cover it. "Though these look like... fresher kills."

"Is this what you felt in the Force?" asked Jodram.

For once Avanc looked unsure of what to say and Jodram knew something was *really* wrong. His hand went to his lightsaber, too late. Something flew out of the dark tunnel mouth on the far side of the chamber; a blur of black that landed right in front of Ranto. As it did a red lightsaber blazed to life and Jodram's first thought was *Sith*.

Then, as the light-beamed speared through the stunned Advosze's chest, Jodram understood. As the Jedi's body collapsed Abeloth spun around, a whirl of red and black, and cut through a second Jedi before she had the chance to fumble her lightsaber to life.

Jodram just couldn't understand where she'd gotten a saber of her own.

Darth Avanc seemed as shocked as the Jedi. He flipped his lightsaber on but danced away from Abeloth, keeping his back facing the chamber wall. Abeloth skipped back from the dead body, into the light-beam in the center of the room. She stopped just long enough for Jodram to take in this form. He saw the long black curtain of her hair, the sickly pallor of her face, the wide mouth filed with sharp teeth, and the gouged-out scorched-black holes where her eyes should have been.

The Queen of Night attacked. Nek Charrik, a little better prepared than the others, caught the first few lightning-strikes of her saber. Kraiss run forward to take her from the side but she lashed out with an arm. Ghostly tentacles stretched out from her finger and stabbed the young man through the chest, tearing bloody holes. Charrik snarled, bearing sharp canines, and lunged. He landed right on her, spearing his blade through her chest, but her own red saber cut through him. Both bodies sprawled on the ground; she kicked Charrik aside and sprung up as though she'd taken no wounds at all.

It was like Master Saar all over again. They'd have to cleave apart this whole body to kill her. In his panic Jodram fumbled to call out with the Force- to Jade, to Lowbacca, to *anyone*- and asked them to help.

They were all far away except one presence, half-familiar, one he couldn't think to name, not when Abeloth was bearing down on him.

He deflected her first attack, ducked, and rolled out of the way. Charrik, mortally wounded, struggled to his knees and hurled his saber at Abeloth. She pivoted to block its wheel of light, but the weapon jerked from its course mid-flight and flew into Darth Avanc's open palm.

Jodram had his opening. He slashed out, cutting Abeloth across the waist but not deeply enough to sever torso from hips. Her body lurched and stumbled; severed muscles and tendons caused her to call of the Force to stay upright.

Avanc had his opening and charged. His sabers, blue and red, came down on Abeloth in a flurry. Even wounded her body moved

like lightning, red sword flashing back and forth to block both attacks. At the same time Jodram tried to attack again, but an invisible hand picked him up and threw him hard against the far wall.

Pain shot from his back through the rest of his body. He struggled to stand. It was Darth Avanc versus Abeloth now, one-on-one; all the other Jedi were dead. Jodram pushed back his pain, grabbed his saber, and lurched to join the fight. Avanc moved with speed and grace; even though Abeloth kept blocking one blade he slipped the other beneath her defenses. First he jabbed her in the upper torso; next he sliced through her upper leg, severing muscle, buckling her body beneath his continued two-saber attacks.

Jodram found his opening. He jumped in from the side and with one careful sweep severed Abeloth's saber-bearing arm at the wrist. The hand, and its weapon, went tumbling away.

His contribution to the fight took Avanc by surprise. Before Jodram could make another thrust as Abeloth's exposed body a ghostly tentacle grabbed him by the throat and hurled him again. This time he landed head-first against the wall. He dropped to into a heap of skeletons but barely felt it. Consciousness wavered; the world darkened. He drew on the Force to stay awake but struggled to push himself out of the bones.

The world around him was blurry, but he could make out two dark forms: Avanc wielding two sabers, Abeloth with none. The Sith swept with both blades at once but Abeloth nimbly dodged. As Avanc raised high for another dual strike another saber, discarded on the floor, flashed to life. Jodram tried to open his mouth, tried to warn the Sith, but there was no time. A red disc of light spun through the air, taking both Avanc's arms off and just barely missing his head.

His arms and sabers tumbled to the ground. Avanc stared at the stubs of his arms in shock. Then two ghostly tentacles grabbed him, lifted him high, and threw him hard against the ceiling. Jodram heard one hard crunch, then another as the Sith Lord's body hit the ground.

The Queen of Night wavered on her feet for a moment. Then, slowly, awkwardly, she turned and began lurching toward Jodram. He did everything he could to push himself upright, to get to his feet, to call a weapon, but his entire body cried out in pain and the Force was the only thing keeping him from passing out.

You hurt me, Abeloth said in his mind, clear and loud, no more a whisper. *You did better than I thought you would.*

He opened his mouth for some reply but his strength gave out. He pitched forward on his knees, barely catching the fall with palms scraping over the rough floor.

You are still weak. You understand that, don't you?

With effort he lifted his head. She looked over him, obscuring all light.

But you will serve a purpose. My purpose. Rejoice, Jedi. Worship me. You will serve me far better than you could ever serve the Jedi.

Her ghostly tentacles wrapped around him and stood him upright, almost gently. Through his pain and confusion, realization dawned.

The smile on her eyeless face spread wider. "Rejoice," she said, and her wide mouth moved with the words. "You will live forever, as part of me."

Jade was still crouched over the Pool of Knowledge, waiting for Lowbacca to find her, when she felt disquiet. Jedi were dying. She didn't know who, or how, but somewhere, they were dying. She reached out to Jodram and tried to speak to his mind but she found only frenzied panic. She jumped to her feet and grabbed her saber but realized there was no place to run to; no way of knowing where to go. So she stood there, helpless and agonized, waiting for the pain of Jodram's death, dreading even more than that whatever agony it would inflict on her two sons: Nat just growing as a Jedi, small Kol whose talents would be ruined before they'd had a chance to blossom. Her greatest fear as a mother was about to become real.

And then it was over. The fighting and dying was done. She hadn't felt anything from Jodram. She reached out to him now and felt... nothing. Nothing at all.

She didn't understand. She'd *always* been able to feel Jodram, since they'd trained together as children. She'd held certain all her life she'd feel his death as awfully and vividly as she'd felt her mother's. If Abeloth had killed him she'd have surely known.

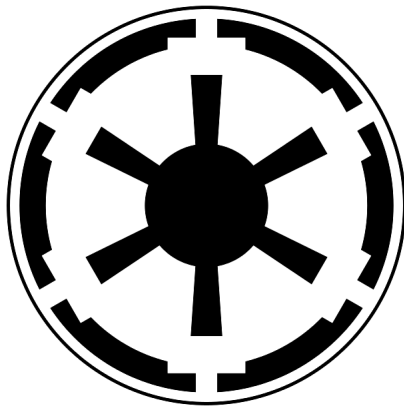
Flickering light caught her eyes and she looked down at the Pool. Though she hadn't blown on it, ripples ran across the water, disrupting the image of Allana on the Throne of Balance. Before the water settled a series of images flashed before her. She saw Allana now in dark robes, surrounded by hooded acolytes, her face darkened by a savage gleam unnatural on her cousin. Then she saw the throne cracked down the middle, the chamber empty except for a single man with messy blond hair wearing a battered bronze chestplate and black trousers. He was sprawled lazily across the broken throne and wore a smug grin. She'd never seen him before but she felt, impossibly, like she knew him.

Then the waters settled. The image resolved into one of an intact throne and more hooded acolytes. Seated on it was a man in rough, organic-looking armor and a mask that covered his face save a tattooed lower jaw. One eye was placid blue, the other red-gold of a Sith. Instead of Jade and Jodram guarding the throne there were being she didn't recognize: a Twi'lek woman whose body was covered in savage black and red tribal markings, an alien male with chalk-white skin and gold eyes, a humanoid female with red skin and black hair pulled up in a topknot. They were circled around the dark man, his loyal protectors.

She wanted the image to turn back, to show Allana in white ruling over a galaxy at peace, but the vision refused to change.

She didn't understand anything except one fact. Before her eyes, the fate of the galaxy had changed forever.

PART IV



THE SEPARATIONS

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

C oruscant was burning. Fires blazed high as mountains, casting pillars of great smoke into the sky. Ash choked the air, blown like curtains of gusts of hot wind. Great towers, miles high, slanted and fell, crashing, spreading more destruction. The world reeked of scorched death beyond measure.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the vision vanished and Allana Solo Djo was back where she'd been a moment ago: the communications center of the Jedi Temple on Ossus.

She felt a heavy, clawed hand rest on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Jedi Djo?"

She jerked at the sound but the pressure didn't lift. She looked up and saw the ancient Master K'Kruhk, staring down with soft concern in his small eyes. The tusked, shaggy Whiphid was even older than Lowbacca and been left in charge of the Order in the Wookiee Grand Master's absence. He'd been alive a century ago and survived Palpatine's great Jedi Purge; for that reason that he'd reacted swiftly when new first came of Imperial Head of State Veers moving against the Jedi Temple on Bastion. As many knights and masters as the Temple could spare were now en route to Bastion, though they were still many hours away and an interdiction field had been erected over the planet, preventing direct access. The lives

of her Aunt Jaina, her cousins, and the other Jedi under siege were entirely in the hands of Davek Fel.

Wide-scale sensor jamming prevented all but rumor and scraps of observation to escape Imperial space, and it was those alone that Allana, K'Kruhk, and the other remaining Jedi were crammed into the comm station now. Only the apprentices were left outside to ponder what was happening; Allana had done her best to assure Kol and Nat and the other children but after what vision that had overwhelmed her, she doubted she could do even that now.

"Coruscant?" Allana croaked. "What's happening on Coruscant?"

K'Kruhk's eyes narrowed. "What *should* be happening there?"

"Just *check*, please."

A younger knight working the comm station immediately acted on her request. The young man looked up at her with a confused frown. "We just pinged our comm satellite over Galactic City. Everything's normal."

K'Kruhk's claws dug lightly into her shoulder. "Did you feel something, Jedi Djo? Or did you *see* it?"

"The second one," she whispered.

K'Kruhk nodded like he understood, but he couldn't grasp the whole of it. Visions of the future granted by the Force were dangerous things. They'd brought ruin to Allana's father; his attempt to prevent the dire futures he'd seen for the galaxy and his daughter had twisted him into a Sith. When she was a child Allana had been blessed and cursed with a few visions. In acting she'd saved her mother and her friends, but never without cost. Those visions had stopped after Abeloth's apparent defeat and she'd been relieved to think them gone forever.

Now Abeloth had returned. Maybe that was the connection; she didn't know. Those flashing images of fire and ruin upended everything and case her into more uncertainty than the events on Bastion.

"Do you wish to contact Coruscant and tell them what you've seen?" asked K'Kruhk.

Allana didn't know what she'd say if she did. Kyrr Esch would trust her Jedi intuition more than most beings, but all she could tell him was that she'd seen death and destruction on the capital world. She had no idea of the cause or the timing, even if she'd seen visions of the past or the future. Coruscant had been ravaged by many wars over its long history. It had never wholly recovered from the Yuuzhan Vong invasion and fifty years ago Abeloth had caused massive earthquakes that had toppled towers and killed millions, for which the Jedi had taken much of the blame. It was one of the main reasons her uncle Luke had severed formal relations between the Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance and moved the headquarters to Ossus.

Esch was now as frustrated and captivated by the events on Bastion as she was. He wouldn't appreciate the extra worry. Still, vague warning was the only thing she could do.

"Yes," she said, "Please. Get me the Chief of State."

Clouds dark with rain rose like mountains high above Ravelin. Lasers streaked and explosions burst around their vaporous peaks as blocky landing craft fell through the twilight sky and tore through the cloud cover on their way to the city below. Starfighters swarmed around the troop ships, attacking and defending, but even to those in the middle of the fight it was hard to tell who was doing which. This wasn't a normal battle where you could know your enemy by the make of his ship. All the fighters in Bastion's atmosphere were TIE fighters. All the pilots killing and being killed were loyal soldiers of the Empire, pitted against each other.

Marasiah wrenched the controls of her TIE Saber and peeled away from the fat swell of a stormcloud. For a second something lit it from within an explosion or a shudder of lightning, she couldn't tell. She swung the nose of her ship back toward the darkening sky; with her naked eyes she could see the thrust-trail of more troop transports falling inbound. According to her ship's computer they were directly above the besieged Jedi academy and the transports were dropping faster than stones toward the surface. Her computer

also delineated TIE fighters from Davek's fleet from hostile snubfighters, but to her eyes they all looked the same.

As she hurried to meet the transports she checked her console; shields still strong, six torpedoes still in the tubes. She'd had to release two pairs already to get past the hostile fighter screen that had blocked them in the upper atmosphere. Through the Force she'd felt the hesitation in her pilots and in the enemy as well; for all their training they'd never expected to fire on fellow Imperials. They'd never wanted to kill their own.

But when the torpedoes started flying and lasers started flashing, adrenaline and instinct started taking over. No one was holding back in the sky over Ravelin; it was kill or be killed and the hardest part was telling friend from foe.

A flash of green lasers scattered over her port shields; Marasiah snapped away but the TIE-X soared past her and looped around; she checked her computer and the fighter was green, friendly. She swore as the TIE-X joined two more of its kind and raced toward another flight of the same ship. The flights collided, broke, and began dogfighting.

She pressed ahead toward the transports. TIE-Xs were harassing the front three ships with their laser cannons and Marasiah waited until she got a target lock to unleash a single torpedo. She watched as the TIE-X broke from its pursuit and divided sharply toward the clouds to evade. The pilot was good but not good enough; he spun his ship in nimble spirals but the torp caught up and burst hot light over the roof of the stormclouds. No eject signal; it was over in a flash.

"Knight One, I see inbound Sabers," Katrin Mull's voice called over her headset. "Coming on your six."

Marasiah glanced at her sensors; Knight Two and Knight Three had darted in fast behind her and were settling on her wings. And up ahead, diving down from the upper atmosphere, was a full squadron of twelve TIE Sabers. All hostile.

"They'll tear up the transports if we let them," Knight Three warned.

"Then *don't*. Get weapons lock. Fire when ready."

"Single or double torps?" asked Mull.

"Your choice." Marasiah let her targeting computer get a lock on the nearest enemy Saber, the one at the edge of the wedge formation. The sooner she fired the more time it would have to evade; she waited, waited until she was close enough to see the green flare from its laser canons reflect on the eight-sided portal of its viewport.

Her wingmates fired first; the Sabers held formation long enough to fire their own volley of torpedoes at the transports, then broke and scattered. The three Jedi scattered too. Marasiah held onto her single torp and gunned it toward her target. He was with his wingman; Marasiah fired a burst of lasers at the second ship that splattered on its shields, then tapped the other button and fired the torp. It took the first Saber by surprise; the pilot tried to outmaneuver but at that range there was no outrunning the warhead. The pilot was good; he shunted full power to his aft shields and managed to absorb most of the explosion, but the effort overwhelmed his defenses. Marasiah shifted her laserfire to the first TIE and a second later it exploded.

The second ship dove toward the clouds to evade. Marasiah took after it and saw one transport in the corner of her vision explode. She forced her attention on the diving Saber. Flashes—definitely lightning—echoed through the billowing black clouds but the pilot seemed ready to dive into them anyway to get away from Marasiah.

She wouldn't give him the chance. She popped off another torpedo, bringing her down to four. The torp came from above, forcing the TIE to duck closer to the clouds. She tapped the firing button a second time, detonating the warhead just shy of its target. The explosion blinded the pilot, buffeted his shields, and forced him to ride the roof of the clouds. Marasiah was on him, plunging through the torpedo's explosion, cannons blazing. Green lasers tore through shields and metal and reduced the TIE to burnt scraps falling through the clouds.

She checked her scanners. Knights Two and Three were still flying. Two more transports had been destroyed but three had just

dropped into the clouds, following the trail of a half-dozen more that had already gone through. They'd be landing at the Jedi academy now and they'd need cover.

She tapped her comlink on and addressed all ships from *Nightwatch's* air group. "This is Knight One. All ships to stage three. Go through the clouds. Go now!"

As soon as she ended the call laserfire rocked her dorsal shields. She snarled back a curse and jumped to port. She checked her scanners; another TIE Saber was behind her, slightly above, its speed reduced to keep her in firing range.

Then a voice said, "You haven't changed that much. I'd know that flying anywhere."

She knew that voice; of course she did. In the rush to get here and the frenzy of battle she'd somehow forgotten that she knew the CAG on *Invincible*; that she'd once flown on his wing and placed her life in his hands.

"You don't have to do this, Korosh!"

"I'm not the one leading a mutiny," Vull snapped.

He fired another set of laser blasts. She kicked in her speed, letting them cut through her wake, and tried to pull up, but Vull was there, spraying more lasers against her dorsal shields. He'd never let her rise and the only way left was down.

She didn't give him warning. She tipped her fighter's nose skyward, like she intended to make a break, then shunted power to the shields and shut off the engines. Her stomach jumped into her throat as her TIE dropped like a stone into the storm-clouds.

Dark vapor swallowed her whole. Water ran in upward streaks across her viewport as her TIE dropped and dropped; a burst of lightning, pure white, jumped out of nowhere and spread across her shields. Her fighters rocked violently and the brightness blinded her even through the light-reduction of her visor. She squeezed her eyes shut, waited two awful seconds for the red to fade, then popped them open.

She was clear of the clouds and falling with rain toward Ravelin sprawled in the night beneath her. City streets were rivers of light,

buildings like clusters of stars. She saw fires down below, burning all over the city too hot for rain to drown.

She knew Ravelin. She knew its geography and she knew where she was, over the southwest section of the metropolis. Her engines turned on just in time. She spun her TIE around and screamed straight east toward the Jedi academy.

In the night she could spot the lights ahead but make no sense of them, so she had to rely on her scanners. Vull hadn't dropped out of the clouds that she could see, but he wouldn't be put off long. Starfighters were dogfighting fiercely over the port southeast of Ravelin where the Jedi academy was. They were battling over the city center too. When she spared a glance to the north she thought she saw one of Ravelin's great skyscrapers furling fire, and maybe a wall of black smoke drifting from the residential district where Davek had grown up.

But she couldn't do anything about that. She had four torps left. When she got close to the Jedi academy's familiar pyramid she got a lock on two TIE-Xs her computer marked hostile and let the warheads fly. Then she dove low, barely caring whether the torps hit. Fighters arrived before her had gone after the tanks and walkers encircling the Academy. The armored units had fought back with anti-aircraft fire, and a few shot-down TIEs had left still-burning streaks when they crashed in the fields around the Academy. She dipped lower still and slowed to see with her own eyes. She saw some fighting on the steps of the main promenade leading to the pyramid's entrance; flashing rifle-blasts, bursts from E-web tripods, and multi-colored lightsabers bobbing and blazing.

She reached out with the Force, seeking a familiar mind to touch. Someone sensed her and touched back, she couldn't tell who. Another Jedi's emotions washed over her; exhaustion, grief, gratitude, relief. Whatever losses they'd taken, the battle was winding down. Davek's troops had secured the Academy, preserved it.

She flew past the Academy before she could try and ask what had happened to her sons. She pulled away from the battle zone, higher into the sky but still below the storm-clouds, and tried to

reach out to them. They weren't at the Academy; she could tell as much. Neither of them had died; she knew she'd have felt that agony. They were down on the planet, somewhere and not far but too distracted to notice her searching.

Then she remembered: the emergency tunnel, the hidden exit in the industrial zone west of the Academy. Without hesitation she gunned for it. Her TIE Saber would get her there in moments.

Then the alarm sounded: torpedoes locked on. She swore, glanced at her scanners, saw another TIE Saber dropping down on her with two warheads blazing the trail.

This low over Ravelin there was no place to run. Even with shields on full she couldn't take two torpedoes impacting at once.

There was only one thing. She pointed her fighter in the direction of the industrial zone and cut a straight fast line through the air. Vull's torps would be on her in a second. She directed her shields to the upper-aft section of the ship, right where the missiles would hit, then groped to find the ejection button beneath her seat. She watched the cityscape rush by beneath her, half-familiar and shrouded by dark. She watched the torps on her scanners, almost there.

No more time. She pulled the ejection button. The roof of her cockpit blew off and the charged beneath her seat blew too, but she gave herself an extra push in the Force. She threw herself clear just in time; explosive heat washed over her and shrapnel whistled lethally past. Vull's fighter screamed over her and then she was falling.

They'd almost gotten back to Roan and the other apprentices when the next Sith fell on them. After using so much of the Force in the last attack Jaina was weak and Vitor and Treis had had to half-carry her back through the alleys toward the warehouse where the rest of the young Jedi were hiding. Maybe they should have been able to sense where the next Sith would come from but they were all too tired, too hurt, too panicked.

They emerged from one alley and saw warehouse where they'd started across a broad street. Vitor spotted a few figures in the open doorway, half-formed figures peering out but blurred by rain.

"Get back inside!" Vitor shouted as he and Treis tugged Jaina into the open street. "Back to the tunnel! Now!"

Then the Sith appeared. They fell from rooftops like they'd dropped from the sky, two on either side. Four figures, shrouded by shapeless black cloaks, lightsabers crackling in the rain, advanced at once. Vitor and Treis pressed against Jaina; Alar, still clutching her wounded side, rose as straight as she could and ignited her saber with her free hand.

"Get back!" Vitor shouted at the watching apprentices, then ignited his saber.

Four Jedi barely strong enough to stand couldn't last against four Sith. In an instant he knew he was going to die. He'd never see his parents again, never see Marin, never become a real Jedi Knight. He could try and buy time for Roan and the others to escape but all they could do was flee back into the tunnel and seal the armored hatch that would only hold the Sith back for a minute more.

The realization could have crushed him, but the Sith didn't give it time. They jumped forward. Alar held up her saber and staggered under heavy downward blows. Treis jumped forward, shouting with incoherent rage, and caught the nearest Sith so surprised the black-robed figure jumped two steps back to escape the boy's wild swings.

Two more Sith came for Vitor and Jaina. The old woman ignited her saber again and moved lightning-fast to block one red sword, then another. And then she let her saber dip to her side and an invisible wave rippled out from her. It spared the Jedi but picked up the Sith, throwing them into the air and dropping them onto the pavement ten, twenty meters away.

Jaina went limp on her feet. Vitor grabbed his grandmother with his spare arm and she wilted against him, so fragile. "Grandma!" he shouted, knowing the Sith were even now scrambling to their feet to attack again.

Jaina's free hand clenched his tunic. "Get out, Vitor. Go. I'll hold them... one more time..."

The old woman was so weak; when she called on the Force she made herself a vessel to energies her body could barely handle. She'd wear herself down to nothing, die under the blades of four Sith, just to give him and the other apprentices a chance at escape.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

It was the only thing left she could do.

The Sith were on their feet. Alar and Treis faced the enemy, sabers held up, ready to defend and die. Jaina's hands dug deeper into Vitor's shirt. He opened his mouth to order the other apprentices to run.

Then thunder boomed low overhead; echoing off the blank walls of the warehouses. Everyone looked up, even the Sith, to see a fireball streak over the industrial zone. Vitor spotted the burning metal sphere and sheared-off pointed solar panels of the TIE fighter; then he felt something familiar but so unexpected at first he didn't realize what it was.

He heard a hard metal crunch on the roof of the warehouse behind him. He spun, looked, saw nothing over the edge. By then the Sith were charging again: three running toward Vitor and the others while the fourth bounded up to the warehouse roof with a Force-assisted jump.

It was a flurry of light and sound. Sabers crackled and hissed against each other. Treis' was knocked from his hand and went spinning across the street, scorching rain-wet pavement as it went. Alar collapse and cried out as a red blade sheared off her sword-arm. An invisible Force-burst from Jaina sent Alar's attack flying back before he could deliver the killing blow. At the same time she moved, so fast, to block the lightsaber coming down on her. Vitor saw the opening, knew it had to be taken. He came in low and thrust high, spearing the Sith through the stomach with his blade. He didn't even feel it go in; it was like stabbing empty air. The black-robed figure released a sound he hadn't expected, a sound that seemed so incongruous: a pained and high-pitched female scream.

He skirted away from the Sith; as he watched her fall something caught the corner of his vision: the pure-white blade of a new lightsaber. He pivoted, staying close to Jaina, and looked at the

warehouse behind him. A figure jumped off the roof: short but thick for its vac-proof flight suit, long dark hair billowing upward as it fell.

When his mother's feet hit the street she charged. The Sith standing over Treis immediately moved to defend. His red blade caught Marasiah's white one; she struck again, blocked the counter-attack, then jumped aside to dodge a lunge. The Sith went off-balance; she cocked one elbow and snapped it into the face beneath the hood, stunning her attacker. A downward diagonal slice ended it, breaking the Sith in two.

The last attacker was charging; it raced right past Alar and went for Jaina, probably hoping to kill the old Master before it died. Marasiah couldn't get there in time but Jaina raised her saber to block low, and Vitor took high. The Sith jumped over them both and came down behind them. Vitor spun on his heel, faster than Jaina, but the old woman wasn't trying to block. With the Force she plucked Deir Sinde's lightsaber from the pavement, sparked it to life, and called it to her hand. It flew like an arrow, blade-first, slicing through the air, into the last Sith's back and out through his chest, until its handle smacked into Jaina's palm. The Sith still wavered on its feet, red sword lifted high as though it couldn't believe what had happened. Vitor didn't wait. He swiped out with his saber, slashed the Sith across the chest. Its body tipped back and hit the ground.

A second after it landed Marasiah leaped over it and bounded right into her son. She knocked him two steps back and wrapped one arm in a vice-grip around his back, pinning him against her.

"Okay, Mom, I'm okay!" Vitor gasped; she was trying to squeeze the life out of him.

"Oh, Vitor," she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

He didn't understand what she meant. "You're here, Mom, it's okay."

They heard two lightsabers shut off at the same time, disengaged from each other, and looked to see Jaina standing in the rain, a dead weapon in either hand. Lightning flashed overhead and light gleamed off her lined but water-slick face, the long white hair

pressed against her skull. Jaina and Marasiah's eyes met and something electric passed through them, something that started with gratitude and went into something beyond Vitor's understanding.

Then, behind them, Treis rose to his feet and shouted, "Look out!"

They spun as one. Lightning flashed again, revealing more dark figures on the roof of the warehouse directly next to the one where Roan and the others hid. The light died but the figures remained; Vitor saw one, two, three more red lightsabers blaze to life against the night.

Thunder rolled across the sky, and something else: the low steady drone of starship engines. Suddenly wind rushed across the street and the drone became a roar. He heard the spark of heavy laser canons firing and suddenly the warehouse roof on which the Sith perched exploded. Fire and smoke leaped up into the rain and blinding electric spotlights turned the dark world bright. Vitor shielded his eyes but when he squinted through cracked-open fingers he could make out the familiar shape of his uncle's starship setting down in the center of the street.

"Unbelievable," he heard his mother sigh.

Jaina, though, starting hobbling toward the light. Marasiah came alongside her and hooked her arm with the older woman. Sinde was on his feet, walking toward *Starlight Champion* as it lowered its landing struts and came down with a mechanical crunch. Alar was on her knees, too weak to stand. A few apprentices peeked out of the warehouse shelter and Vitor spotted his brother's face lit up by the glare of *Champion's* spotlights.

Vitor started toward the ship too, then froze. The body of the first Sith he'd stabbed was right in front of him, lying face-up, the black hood pulled away. The face was plain in the light from Arlen's ship: a human face, female, probably barely out of her teenage years. Black hair pooled around a face that looked so *normal* despite the jagged tattoos that marked it. Two eyes, a normal blue, stared at the night sky without blinking, without seeing.

"Vitor!" he heard his uncle call. "Come on!"

Suddenly it was hard to feel relief. He turned away from the first person he'd ever killed and hurried to the ship. The apprentices were there too, and Marasiah had dropped to her knees to give Roan a cheek-to-cheek hug. Arlen was there with his arm around his mother. People were already starting to head up *Champion's* lowered landing ramp.

When Marasiah detached from her son she asked Arlen, "How the kark did you get here? Where did you *come* from? How did you-"

"I dropped out of hyperspace just a little before you did," he said. "I was monitoring the news-nets so I knew what I was getting into. I held back, waited to see what would happen-"

"And then slipped in after we did."

"Right. I had a little trouble finding you at first, but then I got some help." He squeezed Jaina's shoulder.

His mother, however, looked unrelieved. "What's the situation at the Academy?"

"Davek's troops broke the siege barrier and secured it. I'm not sure about causalities but it might be heavy." He looked at Marasiah. "We've got air superiority too. Cleared out the fighters over the Academy and most of Bastion, but I think some ground fighting's still going on."

Carefully, grimly, Jaina asked, "What about Davek?"

Arlen looked up at the night sky. "I don't know how much longer he can hold. We need to get off the ground. We might need to run."

"Wait, what's happening?" Vitor asked. He'd been so caught up in the battle on the ground he hadn't even thought of what might be going on above. "Isn't it over?"

Jaina's head bent low; a curtain of wet white fell over her face. "No, Vitor. It's just beginning."

Where they stood now was inevitable from when they'd fired the first shot. Davek had known that when he'd given the order, and every second since had been like watching a holo-drama whose plot he already knew. When *Nightwatch* and the other eight destroyers

in his fleet had unleashed their TIEs and landing craft, *Invincible* had unleashed all of its own. The fighters and transports had punched through the initial defensive screen with high attrition rates, then plunged down into the atmosphere toward Ravelin. The two *Compellor*-class destroyers closest to the capital had moved to engage Davek's ships first. Though *Nightwatch* was a mighty vessel it was designed as a carrier rather than a pure combat vessel, and he pulled his flagship back to allow three of his own destroyers to engage.

At the same time, Renwar's three ships had been right behind him. He redirected one of *Nightwatch*'s fighter wings to help *Maelstrom* and *Conqueror* defend the rear of the line. They fought bravely, desperately, but Renwar's *Tempest* was a mighty ship. When *Conqueror* cracked and burst under the bigger destroyer's cannons, Davek called on *Maelstrom* to fall back and broke his fleet in two in an attempt to keep from getting everyone pinned down and slaughtered in low orbit.

They'd barely reorganized when *Invincible* finally entered firing range. Veers' long sword of a star destroyer had pivoted to fire with its full spread of starboard cannons. The mighty broadside was a wash of pure destruction. One of Davek's *Predator*-class class destroyers was torn to pieces within minutes, and a fair of frigates didn't even last that long. *Invincible*'s two supporting destroyers moved in on Davek's forced from either flank, then crept around the rear to prevent them from running while *Invincible* continued the slaughter.

The other half of Davek's fleet was faring a little better. Renwar still moved to engage them, but *Maelstrom* and the three other destroyers it had formed with were fighting back. When a squad of TIE Demolishers atomized the command deck of one of Renwar's destroyers, cheers rang out across *Nightwatch*'s bridge. They'd died a second later, and expressions of embarrassment and shame rippled across the bridge crew.

Imperials were killing Imperials. Davek had known going in that there was only so much he could do against *Invincible*. His only hope had been to land troops on Bastion, protect the Jedi academy,

and pacify the city if possible. The only thing left they could do now was hold out and, if necessary, cover the Jedi's escape from Bastion.

Small things were working in their favor, somehow. Admiral Hallis' *Sentinel* was a mighty *Legator*-class ship, the same as the *Makati* and the biggest ship over Bastion besides *Invincible*. Hallis could end this fast if he joined the battle but the supreme commander was holding his ships on the outer edge of Bastion's orbit, like they were waiting for something, though Davek couldn't imagine what.

At first he'd thought it was reinforcements. The wide interdiction field Davek's fleet had erected around Bastion slowed the approach of ships from outside the system but didn't stop them. Despite that, no new ships had dropped into the Sartinaynian system: nothing from the First Fleet, and more surprisingly not from the Second. Veers had groomed Leonal Grave from early in his career and made him a valuable ally; if he was going to call on the young admiral for aid it would be now.

As another of his frigates exploded under fire from *Invincible*, Korak tapped his shoulder and delivered a rumor and a little hope. "We're picking up scattered talk on the comms, sir. Signals from outside the system about Yaga Minor."

"What about it? Has Grave left the system?"

"No, sir. From what we can tell he's bogged down there."

"Bogged down with what?"

"From the chatter, sir, there's been a general uprising among the Yagai." He let that sink in a moment, then added, "Word of what the Third's been doing to their colony worlds must have gotten out."

It was exactly what he'd been worried would happen since the crackdown on the Kaleesh had started. Other non-human peoples, one who'd traditionally been integrated into Imperial society, might start following the lead of the untamable warrior race.

He'd been anxious over the prospect for so long, but now he saw an opportunity, even a life-saver.

That was when the comm officer called, "Admiral, we're getting priority hail!"

"From the surface?"

The lieutenant's face scrunched as he checked the scanners. "Down below, sir. Looks like a ship in low atmosphere."

Davek hurried over. The jamming field *Invincible* had raised blocked out their sensor and prevented them from seeing what was happening on the cloud-covered surface. It had blocked most communications too, though sporadic message-bursts had kept *Nightwatch* updated on the apparently-successful troops landings at the Jedi academy.

"Do we have in ID on that ship?" Davek asked as he loomed over the comm console.

"Yes, sir. Transponder says-" the lieutenant checked his console, "*Starlight Champion*."

Disbelief, relief, acceptance. It wasn't the first time his brother had pulled a rescue out of nowhere. "Put it on."

The officer flicked the switch and the first thing Davek said was, "Arlen, you glorious bastard. How did you get down there?"

"He got into the system a little before you did," said a different voice, his wife's.

"Marasiah? How did you-"

"We have them, Davek. Roan, Vitor, your mother, all the Jedi apprentices. The Academy is secure too."

"The pyramid?"

"And the airspace. There's still fighting going on over Ravelin."

"What's happening? Our sensors are still jammed."

"We're not exactly sure, but there was a lot of street fighting. Veers landed troops to quell the riots."

"He used *stormtroopers* against civilians?"

"That's right. Davek, most of those people came out to *support* the Jedi."

Davek understood. It was what he'd hoped for but been afraid to believe. Veers had played old-style Imperial prejudice through and through, anti-alien and anti-Jedi. Suspicion of non-humans in the Empire was all too rife, especially after the actions of the Kaleesh and the alien raiders from uncharted space. Those same events had risen the Jedi to the status of heroes; Bastion's knights had been on the front lines of those fights and everyone knew it.

This wasn't the old Empire anymore; in accusing the Jedi of working with the Kaleesh to kill Avaris he'd overplayed his hand and gone beyond what most Imperial citizens were willing to believe.

Veers wasn't an idiot. He'd have realized his mistake. With the area around the Jedi pyramid securely in Davek's control his only option was to annihilate the site from orbit. There was no doubt he could do it; the academy's shields would never withstand a few salvos from *Invincible*. But the academy was so close to Ravelin and there'd be no guarantee his precision strike wouldn't kill civilians, especially with the storm scrambling sensors.

He might be willing to press through, annihilate Davek and the Jedi Order, then waste months or years suppressing their sympathizers. He might also be willing to back away.

As for Davek, the choice was simple. His people were dying by the minute. Even if he ordered every ship he had to charge *Invincible* they would still lose. The only option was a cease-fire.

"*Champion*, what's your position?" he asked.

"Holding in the air over the pyramid," Arlen said. "There's still a lot of Jedi and friendly troops on the ground. Should we call an evac?"

"Stand by but hold for now. Stay alert, keep defending, and wait for my next signal." Before ending the call he added, "Thank you, Arlen."

"Don't mention it."

The line clicked off, the comm officer said, "Call's over, sir."

Davek put a hand on the lieutenant's shoulder. "Can you patch in a line to *Sentinel*?"

He frowned and worked his console. "It's at the edge of the battle zone and there's some jamming, but I think so."

"Do it right now. Sent a priority hail. Tell Supreme Commander Hallis I need to speak with him immediately."

"Yes, sir."

As the lieutenant placed the call Davek glanced anxiously around the bridge. Korak was giving orders to the gunnery crews as one of the *Compellor*-class destroyers entered firing range. Through

the viewport, he could see one of his own destroyers being pummeled by *Invincible's* turbolaser fire.

"Admiral, we have full connection."

"Bring it up."

Davek took a deep breath as the head-and-shoulders holo-image of Supreme Commander Hallis appeared. The old man's face was pinched in a scowl and the first thing he said was, "Admiral Fel, I hope you have a very good reason for this call."

"Yes, sir. I want you to relay my offer to parlay with Moff Veers."

"Head of State Veers," Hallis corrected. "If you're offering to surrender you can do it directly."

"This isn't surrender. My people have the Jedi academy secure, which was our purpose in the first place. I want to call a cease-fire so I can negotiate with the Head of State."

"He'll want a *surrender*, nothing else."

"He'll get what I'm offering. Imperials are killing each other, sir. I don't want to see this any more than you do. If we don't stop this here we're looking at a full-blown civil war. Please, extend my offer to negotiate. I'd be more than happy to meet him on your ship."

Even through the static-blurred holo he could see the emotions warring on Hallis' face. Davek recalled everything his father had said about the supreme commander. He was stubborn and staid, highly professional but often unimaginative, a loyal career man who never started a fight- martial or political- but always tried to end it on his own terms. Hallis hated that it had come to this, and for all these deaths he blamed Davek as much or more than Veers. Maybe he was even right to, but as a professional Hallis could see past his anger. He knew their best chance of stopping a war was right here, right now.

"Stand by," Hallis said at last. "I'll relay your offer."

"Thank you so much, sir."

Hallis killed the transmission without reply. Davek looked out the viewport; another destroyer was crumbling under *Invincible's* fire. Washes of green turbolaser blasts eroded its shields, tore through its starboard flank, and spilled fire and debris into space. Every second, Imperials were dying. Davek had ordered the first

shot; history would never forget that, no matter what happened next.

Then, so fast, the comm officer announced another hail from *Sentinel*. The holo popped to life again and there was Hallis, glowering just as before.

"I've relayed your request to the Head of State. He accepts your offer for parlay on my ship on the condition you stop firing first."

Davek went weak with relief, then turned and called, "Tactical, issue a cease-fire order immediately! All ships, cease fire!"

Echoes rippled across the bridge, and from the bridge to the rest of the fleet. To Hallis he said, "I can't guarantee stopped hostilities on the planet. We're having a hard time talking to our troops."

"Understandable," Hallis sniffed.

Davek glanced at the tactical holo, then to the viewport. The star destroyers ahead of *Nightwatch* had stopped shooting though they kept their shields on at full. He watched the one destroyer further ahead, the one already crippled by *Invincible's* guns. As he watched the gush of turbolaser fire from Veers' flagship dissolved to a trickle and finally stopped. A few more explosions flashed, a few more lasers lanced, and then the space over Bastion was finally still.

"The cease-fire had been honored," Hallis said. "Now we need to start the hard part."

"Sir, I need to request you send a squad of TIEs to protect my shuttle. At least one. I need you to guarantee my safety when I come to your ship."

"You'll have it. Now please get over to *Sentinel* as soon as possible," Hallis said darkly. "You've much to account for."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

To an outside observer the two ships, coupled by dorsal airlocks, would have made a strange sight as they drifted through open space. They'd have vaguely resembled a double-saucer but the smoother, oval-shaped Mandalorian drop ship was almost twice the size of the disc-shaped Corellian freighter.

Because Gevern Auch's ship had more room, the crew from the Corellian-made ship came onto their side. Marin was quickly overwhelmed by it all. Dorn and Ninet had been hard enough to get used to; now she was surrounded by a dozen more armored Mandalorians, all of them uncles and aunts and cousins through some labyrinthine clan logic she had no hope of mapping. There had been a flurry of introductions and names, only half of which she remembered. They were a big mix of age and gender and even appearance. She searched all their faces for traces of the old clone genes, sometimes obvious and sometimes not at all.

When her mother introduced her, everyone gave her the same searching, evaluative look. They'd all heard of her, of course, as her mother's wayward *jeti* daughter. Most looked surprised to see her at all. Her mother had given her family a basic sitrep when calling them out to this rendezvous but had, she promised, refrained from

mentioning who had killed Gevern Auchs. That was another question in everyone's eyes, and a few times Marin could tell she was being evaluated. They were wondering, *did she do it?* and skepticism wasn't because of her age. Fourteen-year-olds were adults by Mando standards. They were wondering if a Skirata-raised-*jeti* had the fierceness in her to kill the *Mand'alor*.

The meet-and-greet, overwhelming as it was, didn't last long. Her mother called them to order and everyone gathered in the ship's cargo hold. Marin perched on the edge of a crate between her mother and Ninet. Tamar had donned all her black-and-blue *beskar* save the helmet, while Ninet was in a loose white jumpsuit and leaned against the plasteel crutch she'd hobbled into the room on.

On the opposite side of the warriors' circle was a big Mando, maybe ten years older than Tamar, with an unlikely combination of tan skin and cropped red hair. "All right, *Tam'ika*," Kragal Skirata said, "Now that you've impressed us all with your new ship, let's get the full story."

"You already know most of it," Marin's mother said. "We've been trying to find out who hired Auchs' people to stage a false-flag on the Chiss and draw them into the war against the raiders."

"Who put you up to this? Imps or the *jeti*?" asked a thinner, black-haired Mando with a scar across the bridge of his nose. Marin thought his name was Mekk.

"Bet it was the old *cyar'ika*," muttered a younger man, red-haired like Kragal. A few people chuckled.

"Is 'all of the above' a valid answer? The point is, Dorn and Ninet helped us. We *thought* we could rely on Salvoc to get us good intel but when we met him on Chorax it was a set-up. Auchs was there and they took me and Dorn." She put an arm over Marin's shoulder. "Thankfully we had good tough *ad'ike* to come and get us out."

The other Mandos looked Marin and Tamar over again, more approving. A boy- a young warrior not much older than them-asked, "Did you kill them *all* or did you take somebody alive?"

"I heard you got one, right?" asked Kragal.

It seemed they were intentionally avoiding the issue of who killed Auchs and she didn't understand why. Dorn, out of armor and with a bacta patch plainly visible over the spot where he'd been shot in the shoulder, said, "We took Galaset alive. *Tam'ika* and I had a *really* interesting conversation while you barves were on the way."

"That Kerestian?" said the scarred one, Mekk. "Bet he was a touch *getts* to break. He *still* alive?"

"We left him intact," Tamar said, voice hard. Marin hadn't been invited when her mother and Dorn had dragged Galaset into an isolation cell for his interrogation. She hadn't wanted to. Whatever had happened to get information from Auchs' lieutenant she was sure it was something the Jedi wouldn't have approved of, and she was uncomfortable being reminded of the brutality that came easily to her mother and all these other Mandos.

"A couple key points," said Dorn. "One: Salvoc set us up for that meeting on Chorax but he wasn't the original leak. Somebody *else* tipped Auchs that we were looking into his Chiss op. Galaset knew I was close with Salvoc so he strong-armed him into acting like bait."

"Who else knew?" asked the teenager.

"Not one of us," grunted the other red-haired one, Jind.

"Before Chorax we got a tip-off from a little blue piece on Broken Moon," Dorn said, and a couple Mandos nodded in recognition. "So we thought about that, but Galaset didn't know anything about her."

"You sure he wasn't feeding you *osik*?" asked Kragal.

"Very sure," Tamar said, still hard. "But he did give us a hint. After Auchs captured us at Chorax he dragged us off to his ship, got on the private comm, and sent one message. Then he came out and told Galaset they'd be taking us prisoners to a rendezvous at the edge of the Exodeen System four hours from now."

"His employer?" asked Jind.

"Sounds like a good guess to me," said Kragal. "You couldn't slice his comm logs, find out who he was talking to?"

"None of us could beat that kind of encryption," said Tamar. "Unless one of you barves is an extra-special slicer and I didn't know."

Another round of chuckles. Kragal said, "Sorry, *Tam'ika*. Wrong crowd for that."

"But you're the right crowd for busting heads, right?"

"Glad to see you're still on top of things," said Mekk.

"I was planning an ambush at Exodeen. Whoever they are they'll be expecting this ship, so we'll go as planned. Turns out Auch's' *beskar'gam* is a good fit for Dorn, so we were thinking of putting him in the suit and fiddling with his helmet speakers to drop the audio pitch a little, make him sound like a *Mand'alor*."

Jind gave Dorn an up-down appraisal. "You had much acting experience, *Dorn'ika*?"

"I won't need it. All we want is to get that ship to lower shields. Then you jump out with your ship, use that nice ion cannon you've got installed, and knock them out. We board together if we can and take whoever's onboard alive, if possible."

Kragal crossed thick arms over his chest. "That's a lot of assumptions piled up. We don't know who's gonna be coming or what kind of ship they'll bring. What if it's a big Imp star destroyer they drop on us?"

"Have you *seen* what's going on in Imp space?" asked the young Mando. "They're a little busy right now."

The others nodded agreement; Marin looked down, sullen at the reminder of what was happening on Bastion. Despite everything she'd been through and was about to undertake a big part of her was still worried about Vitor and Roan, Jaina and her father.

"Maybe not an Impstar, but something else big might drop on you." Kragal wouldn't let it go. "What happens then?"

"If we think we're outgunned we won't even try and bluff. We'll just turn and run," said Tamar.

Marin didn't normally think of Mandos as turn-and-run types but these Skiratas seemed to know the value of discretion. Kragal, more accepting now, asked, "You want to split crews evenly?"

"That's best," said Dorn. "No telling what the situation'll be like when we board."

"I'll stay on my ship," Kragal said, "But I think Mekk and his *ad'ike* might be good for yours. Even things out a little."

"Fine by me," the scarred one said, "But I wanna see this ship before we take it into action."

"Me too, actually," Kragal said. "I always wondered what kind of neat toys Auchs might've stockpiled."

"Like I said, we've got four hours to prep," Tamar warned.

"I just want a whirlwind tour. You scoped the thing out yet?"

"We've found some nooks and crannies. Come on. Whirlwind tour."

Her mother and Dorn led Kragal, Mekk, and most of the other Mandos out of the hold. Marin stayed where she was, a little relieved to be free of so much attention. They were family but also strangers.

"I'm a little surprised," she sighed. "We don't even know who we'll be fighting, but they all got on board with this just because our parents asked."

"Ask is all they had to do," Ninet said. "That's what *aliit* is."

Marin had picked up that word. Family, clan, the unbreakable bonds that came with it. Before all these other Skiratas had shown up she'd overheard her mother and Dorn speaking softly, privately in the cockpit. They'd said Auchs had an *aliit* of his own who'd be none too happy with his death. Mandalorians, unsurprisingly, were not above vengeance-fueled blood feuds. Maybe that was why none of the Skiratas had asked who'd killed the *Mand'alor*. They hadn't *wanted* to know, because the more people who knew the greater danger to Marin and her entire clan.

"You good with that thing?" someone said. Marin blinked, jerked from dark thoughts, and sat the teenage Mando with the green armor. He gestured to the lightsaber on Marin's belt.

Maybe he was fishing about Auchs, but his voice sounded honest, curious, different from the rough and jaded cynicism she was used to hearing all these Mandos, her mother included, speak with. She placed her hand on her lightsaber and said, irrationally defensive, "I'm pretty good. I haven't had it for long."

She was afraid he'd ask if she'd killed anyone with it but instead he looked at Ninet. "How are you holding up?"

"Better than I was fifteen hours ago," she said sourly, "But I don't think I'll be fighting fit, *Nev'ika*. Sorry."

"Sounds like you already did what you needed to." He looked back to Marin. "You going to be ready for this next op?"

"I'll be on this ship. I'll do what I have to." She didn't want to; she was terrified of getting into another battle, of having to choose between death and killing, but she couldn't stand back while all these other people- family in their strange way- were risking their lives in a situation that was at least partially her fault. That wasn't the Jedi way and she doubted it was a Mando way either.

She thought she'd kept her tone strong, certain, but the young man narrowed his eyes, like he'd seen through it all. A little more gently he said, "You did what you had to to save your *buir*. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed. It's just...." Her grip tightened on her lightsaber. "I wasn't prepared for this."

"She'll do what she has to when it counts," Ninet said.

"I thought so." His smile was faint but encouraging. "I'll be honest, I've always wanted to see a real *jeti* in action."

She was about to tell him she wasn't a real Jedi, just an apprentice years away from knighthood, but someone called from the cockpit, "*Nev'ika*! Get over here!" and the young man excused himself. When he'd slipped away Marin felt a little tension drain out of her. She asked, "So who was that?"

"Nevec. He's one of Kragal's kids."

"I didn't see the resemblance."

"Genes are funny things. Perceptive though, wasn't he?"

"Kind of, yeah."

Ninet tilted her head, glanced at her cousin sideways. "I'm pretty sure he's got the Force."

"Because he's perceptive?"

"And more. He's got great timing, great reflexes, great aim. Like he knows stuff before it'll happen." Ninet sighed. "Some people have all the luck."

"So he's like me, then, descended from that Jedi who married a clone?"

"No. Kragal's *ba'buir* was an ex-Jedi."

She tried to do generational arithmetic. "His grandmother?"

"Grandfather. *Bard'ika* laid down his saber to be a Mando healer."

"Okay." She knew asking questions would just get her more confused.

"They've got no clone genes but they're still Skiratas. *Aliit* is more than blood. Do you understand?"

"A little."

After a pause, Ninet asked, "Do you plan on boarding that ship like that?"

"Like what?"

She looked Marin up and down, waved a hand. "Unprotected."

"I've got my lightsaber."

"You might need more than that."

"Well, I don't think Kragal bought spare *beskar* in my size."

"You don't need his. What about mine?" Marin blinked. Ninet stamped the heel of her crutch on the deck and said, "It's not like I'm going to be using it. I'll stay here, help helm the ship. But if you're going in there with your *buir* you'll need protection. Right?"

She tried to picture herself in Ninet's red Mandalorian armor and it just wouldn't come. She knew what she was: a Jedi, no matter what her mom's side of the family was. *Beskar'gam* seemed wrong somehow, but Ninet was right. It would be a whole lot safer if it came to a real fight.

"I'll give it back when we're done," she told Ninet.

The other girl grinned. "Come on, *Mar'ika*. Let's go try on some clothes."

His double life as a Sith Lord and corporate executive often made Darth Kroan feel harried, but the pressure was getting worse lately. He'd left Kuat on his personal shuttle a full day ago because retrieving the package from Gevern Auchs was too important to leave to his agents. Also important was retrieving Corrien Veers'

agent during the conference on Balmorra in two more day. Kuat, Exodeen, and Balmorra were not so far apart that this jumping around was impossible, but he wouldn't have much more than transit time to interrogate the Skirata woman and Veers' agent. Vermin minds were usually easy to break, but here he'd be dealing with a half-Jedi and an Imperial spy trained to resist torture and mental probes. Normally he'd relish the challenge, but time was short and the stakes were high.

Right before his ship dropped into the Exodeen System he'd caught the latest report from Bastion: Veers and Fel had agreed to a temporary cease-fire. Kroan didn't know where that could go but he didn't like it. He'd provided Veers with a super star destroyer and executive access controls to half the ships in the First Fleet. A Sith would have massacred Fel and every one of his soldiers, but then Veers was vermin, not a Sith; a politician who, for all his autocratic tendencies, still cared about saving face. For the first time he found himself wishing for a hands-on leader like Darth Xoran to take over the Empire. It would be so much easier. He'd heard nothing about the ten Sith Darth Wyyrlok had dispatched to Bastion to ensure the deaths of the Fel Jedi, which was not encouraging either.

But he could do nothing about that now. As his ship sliced through the empty space at the edge of the Exodeen System, toward the cold and barren rock of its terminal planet, he tried to calm himself and focus on the task ahead.

As the dark world became larger in the forward viewport the shuttle's pilot said, "Picking up a signal, sir. One ship."

"Type?"

"Mandalorian. *Mantis*-class drop ship."

Auchs' ship, then. It was still too far away to spot with the naked eye. He reached out with the Force. At this distance it was hard to be sure how many beings were on the ship ahead. He felt for the familiar presence of Gevern Auchs.

So many vermin felt alike in the Force: weak, petty, consumed with the pointless little worries of their pointless lives. The Mandalore had always been unmistakable. To hold his ragged mercenary band together for twenty years required an iron will and

more than a streak of cruelty. Had he the Force, Auchs would have been a prime candidate to become Sith, but as it was, he was merely a valuable tool.

He knew Auchs, but he couldn't sense him now. Other minds, faint, unfamiliar, of undetermined number, but not Auchs.

He waited until they drew closer and still he didn't feel the Mandalore on that ship. A sense of dread ran through him as his pilot announced, "Sir, they're hailing."

"Pilot, stand by to raise his shields. Start warming forward cannons."

The pilot frowned but got to work. As his hands worked the console he asked, "Will we respond to their hail, sir?"

"Go ahead. Let's see what they have to say."

A holo-image appeared over the comm console. He knew the armor for Auchs' and the familiar voice, blurred slightly by comm-static, said, "We have your package for you, ready to exchange."

He reached out with the Force one last time. Auchs was not aboard that ship, he was certain, and if someone else was wearing his armor then the Mandalore was certainly dead.

With a flick of the Force he shut off the connection. "Pilot, raise shields. Lock and fire when ready."

The pilot hurried to comply. The moment their defensive screens went up the Mandalore's drop ship raised its own, a half-second too late. The first burst from Kroan's heavy laser cannons caught the drop ship's forward-port thruster and burst it. The ship jerked wildly as its pilot struggled for control. Kroan ordered the pilot to fire again and a second shot scraped black heat across the ship's dorsal side, tearing hull.

"Hold fire!" Kroan commanded. "Bring us in to—"

Suddenly his own shuttle rocked hard as something impacted their shields. The pilot wrestled with the controls and reported, "Another ship, sir! It came out of lightspeed on top of us!"

"Return fire! Kill it!"

Before he could respond the entire ship seemed to scream. The lights shuddered and went dark; sparks of blue lightning danced

across the consoles and the pilot jumped back in his chair, hands singed.

"Ion cannon," Kroan muttered. "How long will it take to restart the ship?"

"I don't know, sir. I, ah—"

The ship rocked again, and he heard metal scrape heard against metal at the rear of his ship. They'd clamped onto his airlock and were trying to cut through. In a minute they'd be aboard.

"Hold here," he told the pilot. "Get this ship working again."

"But sir, the—"

"I'll take care of the boarding party," Kroan said, and stepped out of the cockpit. He tapped the doors closed on the way out, sealing the pilot in and everyone else out. Mandalorians, almost certainly. Maybe the Skirata woman had gotten the drop on the Mandalore somehow, though it seemed incredible that a warrior was experienced as Auchs could be beaten by someone who'd dropped out of Jedi school.

No matter. He could figure that out that later. Kroan stalked in the direction of the boarding hatch and listened to the sound of tearing metal. They were almost through. When he reached the airlock vestibule he stood before it and tried to sense how many Mandalorians were on the other side. Around ten, it felt like, probably all plated in *beskar* and armed with more weapons than they had hands. Normally a team like that would be more than enough to subdue a shuttle as modestly-sized as Kroan's.

He stepped out of the vestibule and to the side of the door. He was wearing the loose robes of a Kuati aristocrat but a few easy shrugs dropped them on the floor, revealing the black bodysuit underneath. He unhooked his lightsaber from his belt, rested his thumb on the trigger without pressing, and waited.

He didn't wait long. The sound of tearing metal stopped. He heard a few more heavy clanks as the Mandalorians forced the interior airlock door open. Then there was the sound of booted footsteps as the first warriors stalked through the vestibule, into the shuttle's main cabin.

Kroan felt them, knew exactly when they'd come. He switched on his lightsaber jumped out in front of them at the same moment. A fast horizontal swing caught the two lead warriors by surprise; they didn't even react as his red blade skimmed over their *beskar* shoulder-plates, under the rims of their helmets, and effortlessly severed two necks.

Heads fell, clanked, and rolled. Bodies dropped but Kroan slipped between them, fast, and came up on the next two Mandalorians. These ones had a little more time to defend. Kroan batted their laser blasts back at them; hot plasma panged harmlessly off *beskar* as they backstepped toward the airlock vestibule but when Kroan was close enough he sheared off the barrel of one blaster, then another. He used the Force to throw the right warrior into his partner, smashing both against the bulkhead, then hurled the two of them back toward the airlock. Three more Mandos were visible at the torn-open portal, all of them shooting, but when the bodies of their comrades were thrown at them they were slow to react. Armor crashed together. Kroan shot through the air, through the portal, into the hold of the Mandalorian ship. He slipped his saber between torso plates, spearing one mercenary through the stomach. He drew out to the side, tearing his guts open, and flicked his blade through the neck of another prone warrior.

Four down. The other ones were scrambling away, kicking themselves across the hold and shooting with pistols and rifles. Two last Mandalorians were standing on the far side of the room, a big one in red armor and a smaller one in green, both shooting madly. As he defended against the hail of laser-blasts he tried to sense more Mandos on this ship but found none.

Nine total, how lucky.

The hail of enemy fire was becoming hard to manage. He jumped high, somersaulted over one commando still shooting from his back, then came down behind him. He caught shots from the two Mandos by the door with his hand and severed the prone one's head from his back with a downward flick of his saber. He spun on one heel, moved on the next one still lying-

-and grunted in pain as a laser-shot winged his shoulder. He jumped back toward the airlock, not even certain where the shot had come from. As soon as he landed he realized his mistake: all four of the surviving warriors were on their feet, readying to come after him from all sides, and he was at least three long strides away from any of them. He would be easy to shoot; it would be hard to defend from all sides.

It was supreme humiliation for a Sith Lord to be killed by vermin, but it could happen.

There was another way. Kroan drew on the pain from his shoulder and used it to fuel his anger. He backed himself into the airlock threshold, cutting off their angles of attack, and batted back the first few rifle-shots, then picked used his mind to pick up sheared-off pieces of the airlock's exterior door. He hurled them, one at each Mandalorian. The two further ones, in red and green armor, managed to duck, but the closer ones were knocked off their feet by the flying metal. Kroan jumped out of the threshold and stabbed one warrior though the chest as he tried to rise. As he pulled his saber free another last blast winged him, nearly fatal. The side of his head throbbed in heat and pain and he drew even greater strength, calling on the dark side energies that could rend matter itself.

He threw his free hand outward and unleashed a blast of Force energy. Just calling on Force lightning gave him more physical pain but the pain fueled his anger and anger fueled more lightning. The closest Mandalorian, the one who'd shot him, writhed in pain as blue energy crackled effortlessly around his armor and scorched his insides. The other two Mandos didn't gawk; they raised their rifles and fired but Kroan batted their blasts back at them.

Then he shifted his lightning to the big red-armored mercenary. A cry of pain escaped his helmet as Kroan shocked him. The smaller one in green was too stunned, too frightened to respond. Kroan stopped the Force lightning- stopped the pain- and lunged forward to drive his saber hilt-deep into the smaller one's stomach. The warrior's body lurched into his, retched from the pain. Kroan pulled out just a little and fished his saber back and forth, cutting

off everything above the hip. The body clattered in two pieces. Kroan let his saber fall to his side without turning it off. He was sweating from exertion, panting from the pain. He looked around the cabin at the bodies: some in pieces, some intact. One he'd shot with Force lightning was still twitching as it lay on its stomach. He stepped over to the body and stabbed down through its spine. He heard another sound and saw the big one in red armor on his back. He was trying to grasp his gun with trembling hands.

Kroan stepped back to that one and ended him with one slice through the neck. Then it was over.

He'd need bacta salves for his wounds. There was still the other ship, but if it had its own team of Mandalorians aboard he was in no shape to capture and interrogate them. Best to blow the thing out of the sky. Then he'd have to wipe his pilot's memory yet again. Then he'd have to try and get to the conference on Balmorra; it would be such an embarrassment for KDY if he suddenly canceled.

He sighed and flexed his wounded shoulder; the pain was still sharp. He shut off his lightsaber, hooked it to his belt, and staggered back to his own ship. First he'd blow up Gevern Auch's shuttle. After that he'd start cleaning things up.

When the visual feed from Kragal Skirata's helmet came went dead in a burst of static and Force lightning, the entire cockpit fell into horrified silence. To Marin it had all been surreal, a flurry of armored bodies too similar to tell apart, but the Skiratas in the cabin had been able to count as one family member after another died beneath the swirling blade and cracking lightning of a Sith.

Thirty long, horrified seconds after they lost contact, Tamar rasped, "Dorn, tell me we have canons."

Still wearing Auch's armor, but with the helmet removed, Dorn began to scour the controls. Ninet, in the co-pilot's seat, said, "I think I've got them online. Targeting computer's fragged."

"Shoot that Sith *chakaar*," growled scarred Mekk. "Blow him atoms."

Ninet wrestled with half-familiar controls, then froze. "*Shab*. He just put shields up."

Marin looked back out the viewport. The lights on the Kuati shuttle had flickered back on. Kragal's Corellian freighter had been cut free and was slowly drifting away.

"What about *our* shields?" Marin asked. "Tell me we have shields."

"Shields are fragged too," Ninet growled.

"Lightspeed?" asked Tamar.

"Should work," said Dorn as he grabbed the ship's controls.

"*Should?*"

"His canons are hot!" Ninet announced.

Dorn wrenched their ship hard to port. The shuttle's first volley of laser blasts went far wide but it would get out another soon, and there was no way they could outfight it if they couldn't get their shields up. That Sith's ship was sure to have more nasty surprises than what they could see.

"*Lightspeed?*" Tamar repeated, tense.

"Where are we going?" Dorn grappled with the controls.

"Anyplace that's not here!" Tamar snapped. "Just jump!"

"Good enough," her cousin said, and pulled the throttle that flung them into hyperspace. Starlight stretched long and blurred into flashing blue and white, but less than ten seconds later

"We're clear," Dorn muttered without a bit of triumph.

Marin's relief faded fast. She mood in the cockpit was thick with grief, shock, anger. From her mother it was thickest of all, not only because of the Force bond she and her daughter shared. With everything else, amplifying everything else, was guilt. Her investigation into Auch's actions, motivated in no small part by a long-simmer desire for revenge, had spiraled into something far greater, something that had just claimed the lives of nine of her own family. Kragal, the Jedi's grandson. His kid Nevec, who Marin had barely known and should have known better. Seven more she hadn't known at all.

The rest of them wouldn't blame Tamar for those deaths. Not aloud, not in their hearts. They were too Mando to do it, too thick with clan loyalty. Marin's mother would, because as hard as she tried, Tamar was never enough the Mando she wanted to be. Marin

realized that, finally. She understood her mother and it broke her heart.

Stars filled the space outside. Silence filled the cockpit. Tamar, slumped against the bulkhead, said, "Please tell me comms are okay."

"Actually, yes." Ninet sank back in her seat.

"Then let me have a seat. I need to patch in a transmission."

"To who?" asked Marin.

"Who do you think?" she scowled. "Your dad needs to see what happened."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

When Darth Terrid stepped into the chamber he couldn't believe what he saw. After she'd quickly destroyed the dozen vermin soldiers who'd been with him in the corridor he knew well what Abeloth was capable of. He was expecting to find the broken and burnt-through bodies of many Jedi and that was exactly what he got.

What shocked him was the sight of Jodram Tainer standing side-by-side with the blind Queen of Night over Darth Avanc's prone body. As he walked toward them Jodram and the Night-queen both raised their heads and followed his approach, as though both were seeing with the same eyes. Terrid reached out with the Force, cautiously, for a hint of Jodram's thoughts, but he found nothing there.

Then, finally, he understood.

"You did well to lead me here," the Jedi's body said. His mouth moved; the voice was Jodram's.

The Night-queen said, "I'm grateful to you, Darth Terrid."

At that name, Avanc's body twitched. He retched on his back and lifted both arms so Terrid would see they'd been cut off at the elbow. He took two steps closer and saw the Keshiri Lord, his

former Master, staring up at him with gold eyes full of shock and hate.

"*You* did this...." Avanc rasped. "Do you realize what you've *unleashed*?"

"He did what he had to to survive," Jodram's voice said, faintly mocking.

"I did what a Sith should have done," Terrid snapped. "I had a weapon against the Jedi. I used it."

"You fool!" Avanc said, then broke into a hacking cough. Fleck of blood sprayed over Terrid's boots.

The Chiss crouched to look his old Master in the eye. As a young man he'd let this Sith Lord terrify him, brutalize him, but he saw now that Darth Avanc was weak. Like so many of the One Sith he'd been skulking in the shadows for so long he'd locked himself in a pattern of self-restraint that denied the true power of the Force, the power the Sith were meant to harness.

The Keshiri's whole body trembled as he said, "Abeloth.... will destroy us *all*!"

"Perhaps," Terrid allowed. Now that she had two bodies in her possession she'd be even harder to kill. If either of them left this planet they'd be able to do unthinkable damage on the galaxy at large. Darth Avanc was right to fear her, but he was wrong to let himself be cowed by fear.

"What will you do now... *traitor*?" Avanc hissed.

Terrid didn't know. He'd made his choice in the tunnel for survival, and because it had been the Sith thing to do. Any wrong step here and Abeloth would destroy him. The only course left was to keep walking the path he'd chosen and hope to survive.

His response was a sharp chop with the edge of a flat hand. One blow snapped Avanc's trachea. The Keshiri retched again, eyes wide, and gasped for air. His handless arms stretched upward, reaching for something they could never grasp. Terrid watched it all, savored his Master's dying panic and fear, until his body went still and his head rolled limp to the side, eyes turned away. Only then did Terrid stand up and face Abeloth.

"Is that sufficient?" He looked back and forth between Jodram's face and the Night-queen's.

"Yes," said Jodram's.

"Most sufficient," said the Night-queen's.

"There are still more Jedi on this planet, and a great warship in orbit. They could destroy us in a second if they wanted to."

"Don't worry," said Jodram.

"I've prepared," said the Night-queen.

He tried to use anger and determination, the traits of the Sith, to keep down rising fear. "And what is to be *my* role in this?"

"Something you can't imagine."

"But you'll learn in time."

They smiled together and their smiles grew wide on their faces. Tiny glints of light, like distant stars, gleamed in Jodram's eyes and the black pits of the Night-queen's face. He felt the caress of a formless tentacle across his cheek and couldn't hide his shudder.

"Don't be afraid."

"I have something special in mind for you."

"And you will serve *beautifully*," they said as one.

In the end only Lowbacca and Ohali had come for her at the Pool of Knowledge. The image of the dark man returned to his throne was still there, shimmering on the smooth silver-tinted water. Jade explained all she'd seen on the water and all she'd felt of the battle elsewhere in the ruins. Then the two of them began to lead her back through the maze to the rest of the group, where the Sith Lord Kheykid was waiting, surrounded by Jedi and Galactic Alliance commandos.

As they walked through the dark Jade said, "That dark man on the throne sounds like Darth Krayt. It sounds like the man Jacen Solo went dark to defeat."

Lowbacca gave a low groan, and Ohali added, "My understanding was that Jacen- Darth Caedus- *changed* the balance. When Luke Skywalker looked into the Pool of Knowledge he saw Allana Djo on that throne."

"I know. He did it by releasing Abeloth. Now it's like the image has turned back. What does that *mean*? Abeloth can't be dead, is she?"

"We didn't use the Mortis Dagger," Ohali said, shirking the encased weapon on her back. "Your grandfather was convinced that is the only way to kill Abeloth for good."

"Maybe they didn't kill her. Maybe they just... defeated her again." Last time it had taken the two greatest Force-users alive. Jodram and Wharn were nowhere close to that.

Lowbacca made a whimpering noise. He was right; they had even less idea how these Throne of Balance visions worked than they did about Abeloth. The only thing the change in vision meant was that nothing good had happened.

They found the remaining Jedi and commandos- and the one Barabel Sith Lord- standing in an area beneath a grid of pillars sprouting low arches. The commandos had placed glowlamps in intervals, providing pools of illumination in the night.

Lowbacca asked for a report. Valiss said, "Nothing since you left, Grand Master. It's been all quiet here."

"Not entirely," Kheykid hissed. "Darth Avanc is dead. I felt him pass."

Stunned silence passed among the Jedi. Jade forced herself to ask, "What about Darth... Terrid?"

"I did not feel him die."

Jodram was alive. Wharn was alive. She didn't know what that mean but she tried to cling to those facts- both of them- for hope. It was flimsy, especially since she could no longer touch her husband's mind at all, but it was all she had.

Colonel Horn shouldered his way to the center of the gathering. "Grand Master, as you know, I've lost contact with one of my commando teams. We still have no good idea what we're facing down here and we're starting to take losses. My recommendation is that we begin a withdrawal to the surface. From there, assuming we make it safely, we can begin evaluating our options." He swallowed and said, "My recommendation is we clear the surface entirely. One call to *Mon Remora* and I can order a full orbital strike."

Dismay rippled through the group. "There's still another group of Jedi down here," Valiss said.

"And I still have soldiers I don't know are dead," Horn said, "But if we need to blast this entire ruin to atoms to secure the success of this mission, I'll do it."

"I felt some Jedi die," Jade said mournfully. "Didn't you?"

"We felt losses," Ohali confirmed, "But exactly who or what, I'm not sure."

Lowbacca asked about Jodram.

"I don't think he's dead. I'm... having a hard time reaching him. But he's not dead."

"I'm sorry, Master Jedi, I really am," Horn said, "But right now I strongly advise we evacuate the planet and initiate orbital bombardment. It may be our best chance of stopping this... thing from getting offworld."

Lowbacca gave the order with a mournful groan. They gathered their things and began retracing the way they'd come back for the surface: the Jedi, the commandos, even the solo Sith. His shielded Force aura and reptilian face gave no indication what he was thinking as they marched their way through the dark. They encountered no more bands of savage Erath, which was the only relief Jade could find in the grim march. She reached out with the Force to Jodram, again and again, but found nothing. She reached out to sense Darth Terrid, calling on her memories of Wharn, but they were faded by memory and the Sith had destroyed and remade her old friend a long time ago. She found nothing of them and nothing of Abeloth either, but she was here, somewhere. Colonel Horn was right; she had to be destroyed and blasting this part of the planet to ash was their best hope of doing so, but that rational knowledge did nothing to alleviate her dread. If he knew about the choice, the sacrifice he was being forced to make, Jade thought he'd accept it save for one thing. It would be bad enough knowing Nat and Kol would have to suffer their father's death; it was worse knowing that she'd stood by and *let* it happen.

She was so lost in her own thoughts- in her guilt and grief for something that hadn't even happened- that when the attack came she was taken by surprise.

They'd reached a space where a cracked old stairwell wound five flight up toward faint sunlight. A commando team lead the upward march, followed by two Jedi, then more commandos and more Jedi in staggered repetition. Jade stayed with Ohali and Lowbacca near the bottom of the line; a set of commandos was all that separated them from Darth Kheykid but the Barabel was as inscrutable as ever.

She didn't see their attacker fall from above but she heard the tang of laserfire and heard soldiers cry out in shock. She heard armor crack hard and the sizzle of lightsabers. She saw the bodies of two commandos fall off the top stairs and smash hard into the ground far below.

Lowbacca immediately ignited his saber and charged ahead. Kheykid was already moving forward, body bent low, tail straight out. Two half-meter red blades shot out from above each wrist. The big aliens took long strides, three stairs at once, and Jade and Ohali ran to keep up. They swung up two full flights of stairs before they finally saw it on the landing: a humanoid female with long black hair down her back, head lifted high to show off a face with scorched holes in place of eyes and skin with a dulled rainbow sheen. One hand clutched a red lightsaber; the other was cut off at the wrist.

Three commandos and one Jedi already lay dead around Abeloth. She must have dropped from above, past the initial rows of troopers, because Colonel Horn and a dozen commandos clogged the stairs leading up to the light. More filled the path leading down and Jade tried to slide her way through them. They had Abeloth pinned here on the landing; whether that was their mistake or their fortune they were about to find out.

Horn gave the order to fire. Laser blasts rained down on Abeloth but she simply stood there, unmoving. The shots sparked against an invisible shield and died, one after another, a hundred times over.

When the confused soldiers finally relented, Abeloth sprang into motion. She dashed for the downward stairs but Lowbacca and Kheykid were there to meet her. Jade and Ohali stayed back; the Duros dropped to one knee to sling the case off her back and draw out the Mortis dagger while Jade peered over the armored shoulders of the commandos ahead of her. Three bodies moved in a flashing, brutal dance. The Wookiee and the Barabel slashed constantly at Abeloth. Kheykid whipped his tail and her body seemed to leap over its crushing path on instinct. Lowbacca tried again and again to pierce her defenses but she blocked every thrust. At the same time ghostly tentacles, barely visible, stretched out from her severed wrist to push back Kheykid. The Sith Lord hacked at them with sabers and when one flew close to his face he snapped at them with his mouthful of serrated teeth but he couldn't grab hold.

"I have the dagger," Ohali whispered as she crept beside Jade. She looked down to see the long, double-bladed weapon grasped tightly in two hands. Ohali was ready to lunge forward and strike but there was simply no opening; the three combatants on the landing never stopped dancing around one another.

Then Abeloth gave them their chance. The tentacles from her severed wrist finally overwhelmed Kheykid's defenses, lifted him off his feet, and hurled him through the air. His heavy body flew right toward Jade and Ohali. She grabbed the Duros woman and threw her hard onto the downward stairs but a few commandos were hit by the falling Barabel. All three tumbled together over the edge, down to the ground ten meters below.

Jade looked up just in time to see Lowbacca's response. The Wookiee had slipped behind Abeloth and let his lightsaber drop. Before the Night-queen's body could spin around, the Wookiee grabbed her arms by either bicep and tore them from their sockets.

Abeloth's mouth opened for an agonized scream. Black blood fountained out from the stump of either shoulder and Lowbacca raised both ripped-off appendages like clubs and began to beat Abeloth's body with its own arms. She fell to her knees beneath the raining blows and Jade could hear bone after bone crack.

She put a hand on Ohali's back and shoved her forward. "Now! Now!"

The Duros sprung up the short flight of stairs, onto the landing. Jade was right behind her as she held the Mortis dagger ahead of her with both hands and charged. Abeloth's body was still bowed from the beating but two tentacles materialized from nowhere and snapped at Ohali's legs. She tried to jump above them, too late; she cried in pain as her legs cracked; her body fell forward and planted face-first on the hard landing. The dagger went skidding away.

Through some impossible power, Abeloth's bleeding broken body reared upright. As she stood a burst of Force energy knocked Lowbacca against the wall but she didn't turn to strike him. Her eyeless head swung toward Jade as she bounded up, right behind Ohali, and called the Mortis dagger to her hand.

She knew Abeloth's next tentacle-strike was coming even before it materialized. It was too high to jump over so Jade dropped down, knees skidding across the hard landing, and bent her body back, back, so the strike sailed just over her arched chest and tilted chin.

She kept skidding, right up in front of Abeloth. Her body snapped forward and Jade thrust the Mortis dagger straight up into the Night-queen's chest.

And for a moment, everything froze. The Night-queen's body pitched forward, deeper onto the dagger, pressing Jade's shoulders against the landing. The queen's head lolled forward and her whole form went limp. Jade pushed back, tilting the dagger to the side and throwing the body down with it. It landed on its side, rolled on its back. Jade held on tight to the dagger and used it to pull herself upright.

She leaned on the blade, driving it even deeper into the body. Then she put one boot on the Night-queen's chest and drew it out.

Finally Jade felt it in the Force: Abeloth's presence leaving the Night-queen's body, like a great exhalation of breath. Then all that lay before her was the broken corpse of one Erath woman.

The world spun around Jade for a moment. She looked around to see Ohali on her back, gasping in pain. Lowbacca was forcing

himself upright. Colonel Horn and his commandos looked on, faces blank with shock, uncertain what to do next.

"It is... over?" Horn ventured.

Jade looked down at the body. The dagger had done as promised: killed Abeloth with one blow. Killed this body, at least. She'd hoped for, even expected, something more than that. Some certainty the timeless abomination was finally, truly dead.

Instead all she could do was look Horn in the eye and say, "I hope so."

Darth Terrid stood beneath the sweltering sun and watched as the Alliance troop ship pushed off from the landing disc and rose into the sky. Its main engines flared and it shot upward into the hazy blue, en route for the great Mon Calamari warship that waited invisibly overhead.

He couldn't feel Abeloth's presence but he knew she was there, along with almost every Erath follower on this planet. If it were any other being but her on that ship he'd have said they had no hope of seizing control of *Mon Melora*, but the past few hours had been a repeating lesson that to Abeloth, all things were possible. It humbled and frightened the Sith like nothing else.

When the flare of the departing troop ship dwindled to nothing he looked around the landing platform. The Alliance transport was gone but several Erath shuttles remained, and any of them would do to lift him off-planet when the time was right. A good two dozen Erath remained on the platform, surrounding him. A few grasped blaster rifles they'd taken from the Alliance soldiers who'd stayed to guard their ship, but most retained only their jagged, curved swords.

They all looked with him with those unreadable insectoid eyes. Abeloth hadn't possessed their bodies but her Force powers had long ago taken over their minds and reduced them to witless pawns. He could feel it emanating from them now as they watched him: a loyal adoration.

He wasn't fool enough to think Abeloth had left him with twenty-some mindless followers. They were as much his jailers as

his protectors. If he broke from the goal Abeloth had charged him to accomplish, they'd fall on him and savagely hack him to pieces. He could fight them, and kill many, but outnumbered so badly he doubted he'd survive.

His only choice was to do as Abeloth had commanded.

Despite the weight of that command, and the knowledge that he was spared death and agony only so long as he was useful to that ancient monstrosity, he felt strangely free. Killing Darth Avanc had been stepping through a door, just like the first murder that Keshiri had forced him to do so many years ago. He no longer felt like a Jedi in denial, or an untrusted tool for Darth Krayt's minions. His life, at last, felt like his own, even with Abeloth surrounding him on all sides.

He looked around the platform again, took in all those mindless Erath faces. Despite their intent, he felt a surge of power in their adoration, and knew he was ready to accomplish his next task.

He reached to his belt and plucked free his lightsaber, thoughtfully returned to him by Abeloth. He looked at the Erath and said, "Come. We have work to do."

It took time to tally the cost of it all. Six Alliance troopers were dead, two more Jedi killed, almost all the others injured in some way. Jade was the lucky exception, but she stayed with the Night-queen's corpse as Colonel Horn's remaining troops began lifting the wounded and carrying them up the remaining flights of stairs toward the surface. She'd returned the Mortis dagger to its case and strapped the case to her back; it was heavier than she'd expected but there weren't many others fit to carry it. Jade watched as Lowbacca lifted Ohali's wounded body, cradling her with two furry arms, and began marching her up the stairs even as his own broken knee buckled with every step.

New sensation came suddenly. Jade knew the mind touching hers instantly, even though they'd not bridged in seventeen years, and that mind had been so very different then.

So softly even she could barely hear it, she whispered: "Wharn."

But it wasn't Ran'wharn'csapla, wasn't her friend. It was what years of Sith captivity, of brutal training and abuse, had forged him into. That mind was cold and intent even now, as it reached out to her in entreaty.

He was calling to her from someplace down below. It was hard to tell what he wanted; because he was being deliberately vague, because he was far away, because he was barely the person she'd once known. She gained intimations of Jodram; that alone was clear.

It had to be a trap, but she couldn't just ignore it. She looked up a flight of stairs. Darth Kheykid was marching up them in Lowbacca's wake; the fall to the lowest level had broken one arm but the Barabel betrayed no pain. It also didn't seem to mind that it was now effectively captured by Jedi and Alliance troops, nor notice that its fellow surviving Sith was reaching out to touch Jade.

Jade hurried up the stairs to find Stefan Horn. As they watched Darth Kheykid trudge upward she tugged the colonel's sleeve, bent close, and whispered, "I need your help."

The colonel frowned. "Of course. What is it?"

"I think there's still people alive down below. I need a squad of troopers to come with me."

"Your husband?"

"Maybe." She couldn't lie to the man who'd helped them so much. "Also Darth Terrid."

Horn's frown deepened. He looked up at the stairwell, then back to her. "I'll give you two squads. You sure you won't want Jedi?"

"Nobody's in fighting shape except me. But please, I'd like the help."

"You'll get it." Horn whistled and called up a man in sergeant's stripes from the lower landing. "Take squads three and four. You're going down with Jedi Skywalker. Search and retrieve. Stay alert and stay in comm contact at all times."

"Understood, sir," the sergeant saluted.

The simple trust and loyalty of those soldiers strained Jade's heart. Even now none of them had any clue what they'd been dragged into; she could feel that from them all, along with their

grief over friends already lost. But they followed her anyway, down the stairs, into the dark lower depths where a grid of pillars joined by low arches spread wide around them.

She felt Terrid's mind calling her. He was close, and she told the soldiers to stay alert. She ignited her violet lightsaber and held it before her, ready for anything. She tried to ask Terrid where Jodram was, what had happened. He responded that they were both wounded and Jodram unconscious, or she thought he did. Again it was hard to tell if he was lying or the link between them weak.

It was foolish to even come down here; she knew that, and if it were just Terrid reaching for her she'd have gone up to the surface with the others, ridden back to *Mon Melora*, and let the warship pound this place into nothing from orbit. But if there was any chance to rescue her husband, to save her sons from the agony of losing a parent she knew too well, risk had to be taken.

Darth Terrid appeared from nowhere. He was suddenly standing in front of them, three rows of pillars ahead. His black cloak obscured his torso and hand but the hood was pulled back, showing his blue face and red eyes.

The sergeant behind Jade threw up a hand to halt the advance. Staying right beside him, Jade called, "Where's Jodram?"

As soon as she got the words out they attacked from all sides. Erath seemed to fall straight from the darkness, swords flashing, hacking away at the Alliance commandos. The sergeant right next to Jade took a blade through the neck before he could call for help. The space around her was a sudden frenzy of agony and death but the sound of a second lightsaber igniting tore her away from all that.

She spun just in time to block the fall of Terrid's sizzling red blade. She let the force of impact tip her back, then reared up one boot and pounded the Chiss in the stomach. Terrid stumbled back and she shouted, "Wharn, stop it!"

Terrid kept attacking, one fast strike after another. Swords fell and lasers flashed and dying soldiers screamed around her but she couldn't let herself notice any of it. She found her back pressed against a pillar and ducked low; Terrid's red blade cut through the

stone behind her and she swiped in turn at his legs. Terrid jumped high, jumped back, putting a full two meters between them.

Jade stood up, raised her saber, and prepared to charge. She barely noticed the pop of one laser blast, closer than the others. As numbness spread fast over her body her lightsaber fell from her hand and she knew what a fool love had made her.

The battle ended quickly enough. In terms of numbers, the Erath and the Alliance troops Jade had brought with her were about evenly matched. The soldiers had better armor and weapons but the Erath had surprise and mindless savagery. By the time the last Alliance soldier bled out on the cavern floor, even Erath were still standing, most of them wounded and exhausted.

It was possible, Terrid thought, that he could fight them, kill them, but what would be the point? By now Abeloth had probably seized control of *Mon Remora* and could obliterate everyone on the planet's surface in five seconds.

That elation of freedom he'd felt on the landing platform had withered quickly in the caverns. He'd passed from being the One Sith's servant to Abeloth's slave; hardly a great improvement. He'd made the change to survive and deluded himself into thinking it was an act of liberation. Perhaps even that had been Abeloth, toying with his paltry mortal mind.

He looked down at Jade, sprawled unconscious on her stomach. She'd fallen with her head tilted to one side so her profile was visible. He crouched low and looked at it, looked at it closely for the first time in seventeen years. She'd aged, of course, but well. He could see the girl he'd known. Something stirred within him; weakness, the memory of affection. He felt an urge to touch her face but held back.

Perhaps he'd loved her all those years ago, loved her like Jodram had. He couldn't remember; raised first by Chiss and then by Jedi, he'd known nothing about love himself in those days. He knew even less now.

He didn't know exactly why Abeloth wanted her alive, but as a Skywalker she no doubt carried valuable power inside her. Whether

Abeloth would kill him upon delivery of the prize was another question, but his sense- perhaps merely a grasping hope- was that she had something else planned for him.

"Take her to the shuttle," Terrid told the surviving Erath. "And hurry."

He wanted to get off this planet and up to *Mon Melora* quickly. She wouldn't leave without them, but Terrid didn't plan to keep her waiting.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

It was an act of deliberate symbolism on Supreme Commander Hallis' part to have Davek and Veers dock their shuttles in the same hangar aboard *Sentinel*. They brought the same type as well, sleek tri-winged craft ubiquitous in both the civilian and military echelons of the government. Beside them, *Starlight Champion* looked all the more out-of-place, but Arlen's ship was just as necessary. This whole battle had begun over the Jedi.

That his brother had been willing to start a civil war to protect the Jedi- or just to protect their mother and his sons- left Arlen inexplicably rattled. He'd known his brother was capable of extreme actions in extreme situations; otherwise he'd never have survived six weeks being chased by Mandos through Senex-Juvex. But for all their lives Davek had always been the good soldier, toeing tight to rules and regulations and the chain of command.

He looked like he was trying to do that still, even after all he'd done over Bastion. When the Jedi filed down *Champion's* landing ramp Davek didn't run up to hug his sons or kiss his wife. He stood his ground, closer to the hangar exit than the ship, four stormtroopers right behind him. Whether those troopers were his or Hallis' Arlen didn't know, but from Davek's reserve he could guess.

The Jedi walked up to him: Arlen first, his arm locked Jaina's to steady her walk. Marasiah was behind them, Roan and Vitor on either side.

"It's good to see you all," Davek said. He tried to keep his voice formal but it wavered when he looked over them all, especially his sons. Roan still looked scared and bewildered but he stood up straight, not taking the hand his mother had offered. Vitor still had the stiff walk and empty eyes of a young man who'd just killed for the first time.

With effort, Davek looked at Arlen and Jaina. "Is everything secure down on Ravelin?"

"Your soldiers have the Academy secured," Jaina said. "I think most of the fighting's stopped in the city, but it's hard to tell."

"Does Veers still have men in the streets?"

"It's mostly back under police control now," Arlen said. Before being called up to *Sentinel*, he'd taken *Champion* on a fly-over of the city. The cease-fire order had taken longest to reach the messy street fighting in the capital and the damage Arlen had seen was worse than he'd expected. Moved by grim curiosity, he'd flown over to the district where the Fel family condominium was located and found the building had been bombed, accidentally or intentionally he'd never know. His brother would have to hear that, but not yet.

"Veers is waiting for us," Davek said. "Hallis too. I've convinced the Supreme Commander to allow one Jedi to speak also."

"I'll go," Jaina said, and started to unlink her arm from Arlen's.

He didn't let go. "Wait, Mom. I need to do this."

"I'm the senior Master on Bastion. Everything that happens to it is my responsible."

"I know, but—"

"And I'm *not* weakened after what happened down there."

Arlen wasn't sure about that. She'd drawn on the Force heavily and repeatedly during the fight, using it to animate her own old, frail body to battle the Sith. On the flight up to *Sentinel* there'd been a moment when she'd seemed to pass out in her seat. She was exhausted but he didn't want to call her on it. He didn't have to. There was a better reason for her to stay behind.

To Davek he said, "I've heard about Veers accusations. They're about *me*. About the things I've done. I'm the one who should answer for them."

"Yes, I think you're right," Davek said, stiffly, with a hint of reproach.

"Who else will be there besides Veers and Hallis?"

"Just them, and us."

"Then we're trying to appeal to Hallis?"

"Both ideally. But yes. I think the Supreme Commander might be... more amenable to what you have to say."

"Good." Carefully, slowly, Arlen let go of his mother. Jaina wavered on her feet and he steadied her with a touch of the Force.

They left their family after that and started down the hall. Two stormies walked ahead, two behind. Clearly they were Hallis', as much wardens and bodyguards. Arlen sidled close to Davek and whispered, "There's more you need to know."

"I figured there would be."

"There were Sith down there. You know that, right?"

"Marasiah told me. What happened?"

"They're dead. I took out some, so did Marasiah and Mom. Vitor killed one."

Davek's pace slacked but all he said was, "I see. Where did they *come* from?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. But if they're in bed with Veers—"

"Don't accuse him, not until you have proof."

Arlen thought Sith being there was proof enough but this wasn't the time to argue. "That's the other thing. On the way here I got a call from Tamar and her cousins. A vid-stream too."

"Is Marin still with them?"

"Yes. She's fine," he said, though from the tone in Tamar's voice during her brief message he wasn't quite sure. "Davek, you saw that video. The Mandalorians pulled a false-flag on the Chiss to get them into a war."

"I know. I saw it. I haven't taken anything to Aunt Wyn yet. I need proof of who hired them."

"Well, Tamar and Marin were looking into that. *Are* looking into it. They tracked one of the Mandalore's close allies, someone who knew we were looking into that op. Tamar gathered a bunch of her relatives and tried to ambush the guy."

He stopped and grabbed Davek's arm. His brother stared, confused; the impatient stormtroopers turned to face them. Arlen tilted his head in close and said, "They failed. A bunch of Skiratas got killed. By a *Sith*."

"You're positive?" Davek hissed.

"Dead. Tamar showed me video-feed from a Mando helmet-cam right before the guy wearing it got fried by Force lighting. And Davek, I *know* that Sith."

"You mean you fought him before?"

"No." He lowered his voice even more. "That Sith is Retor of Kuhlvelt."

For a second Davek's face was blank, like he didn't know the head of the galaxy's biggest shipbuilding conglomerate by name. Then his eyes darkened. "They say Retor consorts with Veers. They got close working to get *Invincible* built. But Arlen, this is *Retor of Kuhlvelt*. He's one of the richest men in the karking *galaxy*."

"Darth Sidious was the karking chancellor of the Old Republic. The Sith recruit big when they can. I'm guessing that's what happened with Retor."

Davek squeezed his eyes shut, like he could wish away all this. A stormtrooper, impatient, said, "The Supreme Commander is waiting."

Eyes opened. Davek asked, "Anything *else*?"

"Only that I called Chance Calrissian. Apparently Retor's expected to attend a big conference for defense industry bigwigs on Balmorra in two days. It'd look bad for KDY if he doesn't show. The Skiratas are already on their way. I'm going to be there if I can. Chance is going, he says he can get me an in."

"The Supreme Commander is *waiting*," the stormtrooper repeated.

"All right," Davek told them both. He stepped back from Arlen, straightened his uniform, and began walking. Not looking at his brother he asked, "Is there any *more* good news?"

"I think that's it for now. How about you?"

"Before I left *Nightwatch* I got word. Reinforcements from the Fourth Fleet are on the way."

"Well. That *is* good news. How much and what kind?"

"Message didn't say. Operational security."

"Ah."

"Arlen... Thank you. For what you did on the planet. For being here at all. What comes next isn't going to be easy."

Davek said that like his brother had no idea, but Arlen did. He knew exactly what he was walking into, even more than Davek. For so long the Jedi Order had operated on the fringes of Imperial law, obeying it most often but sometimes skirting around it or even disobeying outright according to what the Force demanded. No one had skirted or disobeyed more than Arlen and in doing what he'd known was right he'd opened the door to more trouble than he'd possibly imagined.

There had to be an accounting. That, too, was part of being a Jedi.

The conference room in which the fate of the Empire would be decided was as plain as could be: a small viewport looking out at stars, one rectangular table, four chairs with two already occupied. When Davek and Arlen sat down the admiral faced across from Veers, the Jedi from Hallis.

Hallis passed a stern look around the table. "I want to remind you all why we're here. Thousands of Imperial soldiers have *died* today. This is a tragedy. I'm hoping we can put the bloodshed behind us."

"I'm very willing," said Veers, eyes locked on Davek's, "I didn't desire this, and I didn't fire the first shot."

"The first shot," Davek said, "Was fired by your stormtroopers. We lost eight Jedi down on Bastion. It could have been much worse."

"They should have complied and handed over their leader for arrest."

Their leader was Davek's mother; he tried not to let his anger show. "I took whatever steps I could to defend the men and women who've been on the front lines, battling the raiders to protect the Empire."

"To what end?" Veers' glare darted to Arlen. "I see you've brought your brother along. Am I supposed to take his word as truth?"

"I am curious," Hallis said, "Why did you come along instead, Jedi Fel, instead of your mother?"

"I have to set some things straight. A lot of Moff Veers' accusations are directed at me, as I understand it."

"I am the elected Head of State," Veers snarled. "By Imperial law I demand you address me using my proper, legal title. I won't be disrespected by mutineers and traitors."

There was something off about Veers. He was as smooth an operator as they came, alternately charismatic, passionate, or controlled when he needed to be. He was on edge and couldn't hide it, maybe because his plan to arrest Davek and the Jedi had gone badly awry, maybe because his best admiral was stuck on Yaga Minor, bogged down by a native revolt they should have anticipated. Maybe because he'd learned something new from his Sith ally, Retor of Kuhvult, if they were really partners in this, but Davek had no proof yet.

Veers acting rattled wasn't encouragement. It meant he was more desperate and therefore more dangerous. Veers and Davek had both stepped over lines they couldn't walk back from. The whole room knew it.

"We know what the Head of State's accusations against the Jedi and me are," said Davek. "My position is that he and unknown allies have been planning to act against us since well before the *Grievous* incident."

"A conspiracy," Veers snorted. "The defense of the desperate."

Hallis asked, "Do you have evidence, Admiral Fel?"

"I do." Davek took a datacard and placed it in front of Hallis. "You can review this, but it contains marked records showing that a shipment of materials was transferred to Bilbringi from the Yards at Yaga Minor. I have a deputy chief quartermaster who will testify that he let these two crates pass into our storage area without being properly inspected and registered, on the urging of a friend and former CO named Colonel Homs Malkin of the 221st Infantry Regiment. The 221st was transferred from Yaga Minor to Bilbringi after the Battle of Valc VII. The crates were transferred shortly after the Battle of Kalee."

Hallis reached out to touch the datacard. "What does all this prove?"

"The crates, sir, contained stormtrooper armor made up of cortosis ore." Hallis' frown deepened; Davek added, "Troopers with the same armor moved against the Jedi academy on Bastion today. Again, the 221st and its armor were secreted aboard Bilbringi after the Battle of Kalee, *before* Sevok-358 and well before the *Grievous* incident."

"That means nothing," Veers said. "Did this Captain Mallin tell you *I* set him up for all that? Or did you kill him already?"

"Colonel Malkin, Head of State," Davek said coolly. "And he's alive and in custody, along with the rest of the 221st. In fact he's on his way now, along with the cortosis armor, aboard a backup contingent from the Fourth Fleet."

Veers' right eye twitched and his lips pressed right in anger. Hallis looked thoughtful but said, "This is interesting, but so far you've done nothing to address the Head of State's charges against you or the Jedi Order."

"Name them," Arlen said. "I'll address every charge."

"Very well," Veers hissed. "Number one: *Someone* leaked classified military intelligence to the Jedi and allowed them to locate Sevok-358."

Davek half-expected his brother to argue there'd been no harm done, that it had all worked out for the best, but Arlen looked straight at Hallis and said, "Davek didn't do a thing. That was me. *Only* me."

"You *admit* you stole it?" snapped Veers.

"I enlisted someone *else* to steal records from the Kaleesh ship we captured at Valc VII. My agent passed the records to the Jedi on Ossus."

"Who did you enlist? Tell us."

Arlen looked right at Veers. "A Mandalorian."

Veers' eyes narrowed; his face became a mask. Davek couldn't tell what it meant, but maybe Arlen was getting something through the Force. Very guarded, Veers asked, "Are you referring to your wife, Jedi Fel?"

Of course he'd know about Tamar. Arlen, just as guarded, said, "That's correct. I'm sorry, but she's well outside Imperial space right now."

Veers looked at Hallis. "You heard him. He admitted treason. The entire Jedi Order was complicit."

"I actually wondered if *treason* was the word," said Arlen. "You all know the Jedi aren't officially members of the Imperial military. We fight on invitation. Except for the fact we don't get paid, we're a little like Mandalorians. Don't you agree, Head of State?"

"The Empire does not hire Mandalorians, or any other mercenary scum. I was against using your kind from the start, for reasons that should be obvious to us all."

"I believe they are," Hallis said, grim but not condemning. "However, Jedi Fel's guilt in this case does not indict the whole Jedi Order. And you leveled more serious charges, Head of State."

Veers nodded. "I charge these men with complicity in the murder of Avaris and Darakon. We *know* they let the *Grievous* escape the Battle of Kalee. The combat shuttle Jedi Fel was on had an opportunity to destroy that ship as it fled but he didn't. It's clear on all the battle reports."

"You're right, I did that," Arlen said. Davek stared at him; not matter what happened, even if they forced Veers to stand down, there would be hard repercussions for his brother. "And you know what? Davek ordered me to *destroy* that ship. He told me to blow it out of space. And if you check those battle records you'll see

Marasiah came in right after me and *did* take a shot. Too little too late, but she followed orders like a good soldier. I didn't."

"And why," Hallis said, "Did you let a hostile ship escape?"

Arlen looked down at the table, gave a deep breath. "We boarded the *Grievous*. We fought the Kaleesh aboard. I'd fought the raiders before and I sensed the Kaleesh were different."

"You *sensed* it? With your magic Force?" Veers snorted.

"That's right. The raiders felt like hungry nek battle hounds. The Kaleesh were desperate and scared. They only wanted to fight for their freedom."

"They were traitors to the Empire!" He pounded the table. "Supreme Commander, you're hearing this, aren't you? This Jedi admits to aiding and abetting the actions of enemy aliens. He *admits* it!"

"*Against* Davek's orders," Arlen said. "And believe me, we had a fight about it later. Ask Marasiah, she was there."

"Jedi Fel," Hallis said, "Do you have any reason for letting the *Grievous* run aside from what your Force told you?"

"They were running. They were no threat at the time. My conscience wouldn't let me kill them. And obviously, I had no idea what they planned to do to Avaris."

"They were enemy combatants. That made them a threat."

"To a soldier. But I'm just a Jedi." Arlen glanced at Davek for the first time in minutes. "I do admit I'm guilty of disobeying a direct order from my superior. If you want to charge me with something else, take your time, but you can't court martial me since I wasn't in your military at the time. I'm not now either. I'm done."

"Arlen," Davek asked, "What are you saying?"

His eyes went sad, his voice soft. "I'm saying that I may be a Jedi, but I can't be an Imperial knight any more."

"How noble of you," Veers hissed, "How self-sacrificing. Do you want me to weep over the sacrifice you're making?"

"I don't really care what you do, Head of State."

The noise Hallis made was between a sigh and a growl. "What Jedi Fel has admitted to are serious actions, and they'll be dealt

with. None of them, however, seem cause to act against Admiral Fel or the Jedi Order."

Davek leaned forward. "I'm sure the Head of State must have more evidence." Veers caught his glare, held it. His upper lip twitched into a sneer but he didn't speak. Davek said, "I forgot to mention. After Colonel Malkin tried to detain me I ordered full security sweeps all over the Bilbringi 'Yards and every ship from the Fourth in drydock. That was still ongoing when we left for Bastion, but the most recent message I got from Vice Admiral Jaeger says they found a team of unauthorized personnel trying to access the *Makati's* communications computer. Their retinal scans match with soldiers from the 221st. Head of State, what do you think they were doing in there? Adding faked communication records to the memory core, perhaps?"

"Frankly, Admiral, I don't believe they *were* there. But please, bring these so-called conspirators you've scrounged up. Try and dig the truth out of them. Maybe your Jedi brother can pry their minds open and make them talk like puppets."

"Jedi Fel," Hallis said, "Is also under investigation."

"Also? What are you saying?"

Davek said, "If you were behind these actions since before Valc VII then your transgressions far outweigh what Jedi Fel has done. Am I correct, Supreme Commander?"

Hallis settled back in his chair. He looked very tired, very old, when he said, "I believe you are."

Veers jerked out of his chair. "I have nothing to hide. I welcome judgment."

"I'm sorry, but I can't ignore this information."

"You are not the leader of the Empire, *I* am. By law. I can strip you of your rank just like I gave it to you."

Hallis just stared, like he was daring him to do it. Instead Veers pounded the table with his fist. "Fine. We'll wait for the so-called evidence against me Fel suddenly mustered. I have evidence of my own, evidence that *proves* he was in communication with the *Grievous* after the Battle of Kalee and fed it critical intel to kill Avaris."

"What evidence?" asked Davek. He'd prayed he'd caught every attempt by Veers to snare him but he couldn't be sure.

"Evidence I've kept stored aboard *Invincible*. I'll go to my shuttle and request it be brought over."

As he started for the door Hallis rose up. "You can talk to them from here, Head of State."

Veers shouldered past him. "I trust the security aboard my shuttle, not yours. And I don't take orders from you. If you want to send some guards to peer over my shoulder, fine. Do it. Like I said, I have nothing to hide."

"We'll go with you." Arlen rose from his seat; Davek did too.

Veers spread his arms and laughed bitterly. "Of course, it's no insult at all to have an admitted traitor watching over me."

Davek looked at Hallis. "We'll go back to the hangar. All of us."

"Very well," The old man said. "I'll call extra security."

Eight stormtroopers showed up to escort them through the hall and down the turbolift. Everyone walked in crisp silence and there was so much Davek wanted to ask his brother: if he could tell what Veers was planning, if he'd felt anything on mention of the Mandalorians. Above all he really wanted to know if Arlen had meant what he'd said about quitting the Empire. A guilty part of Davek was relieved by the thought; he loved his brother but working with him had brought trouble time and again. He wasn't a good soldier, not like Marasiah, and he never would be.

When they reached the landing bay more stormtroopers were there; Hallis was taking this all very seriously. Veers ignored them all with impeccably dignity and marched straight to his shuttle, which sat on the opposite side of the flight deck from *Starlight Champion* with Davek's shuttle in between. A half-dozen stormtroopers followed Veers up the ramp. Davek and Arlen slipped over to their family and the cluster of Jedi apprentices who all stood beside *Champion* with confused expressions.

"What happened?" Marasiah asked, looking between them.

"Simple," Arlen said, "We told the truth."

"What about Veers?" Jaina asked.

"Putting in a call to *Invincible*," supplied Davek. "He says he's got more evidence against us but Hallis doesn't trust him. We-"

The hanger filled with the roar of sublight engines bursting on from a cold start. Veers' shuttle jumped up on a burst of repulsor energy without raised its ramp or retracting its gear. As it jerked off the deck and spun for the hangar mouth two white-armored bodies tumbled out and cracked on the deck. Hallis shouted something over the engines and a few stormtroopers raised their rifles to fire.

The shuttle jumped for the exit, engines bright. Arlen grabbed Davek and their mother and pulled them back just before the shuttle's rear defensive turret pumped out a chain of red laserblasts that hit Davek's unshielded shuttle and turned it into a geyser of flame and smoke. Alarms wailed and emergency sprinklers poured down water as Veers' shuttle leaped out of the hangar mouth.

Davek's ears rang; the intense heat of the burning shuttle washed across the chamber, warming his face. He spun around; his family and the other Jedi were safe. They must have sensed Veers' intent, called on the Force and shielded themselves from the concussive blast right before it hit. He looked at the rest of the hangar and saw stormtroopers running around frantically; one of them was on his knees next to Hallis, who struggled to sit upright with one hand on his stomach over a spreading dark stain.

There was no way to stop Veers from getting back to *Invincible*. There wasn't even a way for Davek to contact his ships from here. He looked back at *Starlight Champion* and it looked undamaged; maybe Arlen had shielded it too.

He thought to grab his whole family, get on that ship, and dash back to *Nightwatch*. Then he thought better.

He staggered over to Arlen, grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and shouted, "Go! Get on *Champion* and get out of here!"

"What?" Arlen blinked ashes from his eyes. "You need to get back to-"

"There's no place safer than *Sentinel* right now. No place safer for our *family*. But you need to go, Arlen! You just admitted to crimes against the Empire!"

"But Veers-"

All this time and he *still* didn't get how it worked. He looked back at Hallis; a medical team had arrived for him. "Get on that ship. Go. *Now!*"

Arlen tried to pull free. "I'm not running from what I did."

"Get to Balmorra. Stop that Sith. You can't waste time." He shoved Arlen so hard he nearly fell back. The Jedi straightened himself and spun in one dizzy circle, taking in his mother, Marasiah, his nephews, all the young Imperial Jedi he'd helped train. Then he stopped and looked at his brother one more time.

After what he'd admitted there was no future for him in the Empire. His actions would only taint Davek at a time when he needed legitimacy more than ever. Once Arlen got on *Champion*, once he flew off in pursuit of that Sith, there'd be no going back.

Arlen knew it. Davek knew it. They stared at each other, a wordless goodbye that was all they'd get. Then Arlen turned and ran.

Lukas Briggs was a supply and procurement officer, and once upon a time he'd been a stormtrooper. In twenty-some years of Imperial service he'd never once set foot on the bridge of a star destroyer. He'd wanted too, once- who hadn't?- but with time the desire had faded to nothing.

Even when he was young, he'd never imagined he'd be on the deck of an eight-kilometer-long behemoth like the *Afsheen Makati* when it charged toward a very possible combat situation.

The *Makati* wasn't totally repaired but Vice Admiral Jaeger, who now strode with authority down the bridge's center aisle, had insisted it and the half-dozen destroyers alongside it were good enough to fight. Reports of fighting over Bastion had rushed their departure, and Lukas hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to his wife and kids in person. As they'd hurled through hyperspace they'd kept in communication with *Nightwatch* and learned that Admiral Fel and Head of State Veers has agreed to a cease-fire and parlay with Supreme Commander Hallis as arbitrator. The interdiction field was still up and the task force was pulled from

hyperspace well clear of the planet, but their sensors immediately came online to assess the situation.

Lukas had been hoping, if not quite expecting, the cease-fire to still stand. Instead he took in the tactical readouts and his heart sank into his gut. Nothing made sense from the reports he'd just read: *Invincible* was wrenching away from the planet. Every other ship, from both Davek's forces and the First Feet, seemed to be moving to corral it.

"What the hell is going on out there?" he muttered aloud.

"I have no idea," Jaeger scowled, suddenly at his shoulder. "Comm, hail *Nightwatch*. Get a sitrep."

"Already getting hailed from *Sentinel*, sir," the lieutenant said. "It's Admiral Fel."

Jaeger hurried over, Lukas right behind him. The holo that popped up was indeed Davek Fel. The admiral said without preamble, "Hold positions where you are. Repeat, hold position."

"Admiral, what happened?" asked Jaeger.

"Long story, but Veers went back to *Invincible*. He's making a run for it."

Lukas said, "The rest of the ships—"

"The Supreme Commander's incapacitated but as ranking officer I'm acting with his authority to prevent Veers' escape."

"But he's the legal Head of State!"

Fel hesitated to respond, then someone beside him called his attention. The holo shut off without warning. Jaeger and Lukas looked back at the tactical holo and saw that Veers had begun opening fire on the nearest interdicator cruiser. He was desperate to escape and willing to restart the fighting to do it. Helpless, the *Makati*'s crew watched as the nearby destroyers from the Fourth opened fire to defend themselves. *Sentinel* pulled forward too, though it was still out of firing range. Both interdicator cruisers tried to flee but the closer one would be smashed by *Invincible*'s guns in minutes. The other was further away and might last long enough for all the other ships to corral and beat Veers into submission, but that super star destroyer would take a lot of punishment and deal out even more.

But the destroyers from the First, Lukas saw, remained where they were. They didn't fire, they didn't move. It was like they'd gone dead in space. Jaeger saw it too; he asked the tactical lieutenant, "What's going on? Why are only the Fourth's ships firing?"

The officer frowned as he looked at his scanners. "We're getting no signals from the First's destroyers, aside from *Sentinel*. They're still there, but there's nothing, no engines, no comm signals."

"Like someone flipped off a switch," Lukas muttered.

Jaeger stared at him and like he was an idiot again; then realization lit in his eyes. "You may be onto something, Major."

"If Veers can do that to those ships, why not *Sentinel*? Why not all of ours?"

"I have no idea. I think—"

"First drag ship destroyed," Tactical reported, and Lukas watched as the interdicator's green marker flashed yellow and disappeared from the holo. He watched as *Invincible* lurched forward, firing on any ship that got out of its way as it climbed away from Bastion. The great destroyer moved slowly but there was no stopping it, and smaller ships veered out of its way.

Then another set of markers lit up. The second interdicator was under fire, but *Invincible* was too far away. The drag ship was trapped between two destroyers from the Fourth, one of them Vice Admiral Renwar's *Tempest*.

"What the hell is she doing?" Jaeger asked as they watched the interdicator's marker flash yellow as its shields failed. Before it winked out the command deck shuddered slightly and an officer reported, "The drag field is down, sir!"

Renwar pulled her ships away from the wounded interdicator and vectored away from the planet. *Invincible* was already on its way out. Lukas and Jaeger watched, still too confused for words, as the three star destroyers escaped Bastion's gravity well and vanished into hyperspace, leaving battle-scarred fragments of the First and Fourth fleets behind.

The fight was over, the capital apparently secure, but in his heart Lukas knew they'd just lost something far greater.

* * *

Day had returned to Ravelin. The sky was overcast, blocking out sunlight but leaving light enough to see the damage from the past night's battle. Entire skyscrapers stood as blackened husks in the city center. Smoke still rose from smoldering fires, black pillars that merged with low clouds. Crashed TIE fighters had smashed into buildings and torn lines of black debris through the streets. Even neighborhoods on the outskirts hadn't been spared.

The mid-rise building in which the Fel family condominium owned two floors had been hit. From what Davek could guess from looking at the damage, a TIE fighter had been shot out of the sky and, on its way down, crashed into the highest levels. The explosions had started a fire that spread throughout the tower, only slightly hindered by the rain.

The Fel quarters had been spared total destruction, but there'd be no salvaging it. Against the advice of the recovery crews, he'd had the airspeeder drop him off in the blackened wreckage of the family living room. The entire outer wall had crumbled. Even now flecks of drizzle fell through the gap, tickling his face, dampening the scorched-black floor and walls, the tattered remains of the couch, the metal husks of the kitchen equipment.

Davek walked through the ruin slowly. He felt empty inside. Not tired, despite all that had happened, just empty. The sliding door to his old bedroom was shut, but he grabbed edge with both hands and pushed it open. The fire had gotten into his old room too. The only bed he'd slept on for the first sixteen years of his life was a scorched frame and few twisted springs. Part of the ceiling had caved in, smashing the desk where he'd labored at schoolwork. He'd been so studious as a child, desperate to excel at *something* if he could never be a Jedi. The outer wall remained but the glass window through which he'd spent so many nights staring at the skyline had been shattered. Cold wet air gusted through the opening. He crouched and looked through the gap at the black and smoking towers of his city. Still, he felt nothing.

Feet crunched debris on the floor behind him. He rose, turned around. Wind tickled the back of his neck as he saw at his wife. She hadn't slept since they'd left Bilbringi either and the weight was

showing under her eyes. She hugged herself against the cool and said, "We can't stay here long."

"I know. I just wanted to see it." To experience it. To know that the home he'd grown up in was gone. A part of him had always lingered here, even after becoming an adult. An admiral. A war hero. A husband and father.

Whatever he was now.

Veers and *Invincible* had fled to Yaga Minor. They knew that much. Supreme Commander Hallis was wounded and undergoing critical surgery. The Moff Council was fractured, with a handful of governors pledging continued allegiance to Veers while most stood silent on their homeworlds and refused to answer Davek's hails. The chain of command was unclear. Admiral Mearv of the Third Fleet was holding over Kalee and half his ground forces were stuck dirtside on rebellious alien colony worlds. Hallis' replacement as head of the First was five days on the job and most of his ships wouldn't work. Analysts had detected a computer program deep within the memory core of many First Fleet destroyers that had, somehow, been triggered by Veers to shut down all critical systems. None of the ships from the Fourth seemed to be affected, and neither was *Sentinel*, perhaps because the flagship was older than most ships in the First.

The Fourth Fleet, battered as it was, remained the force best fit to confront Veers and the Second at Yaga Minor. It already controlled the capital and Bilbringi. And that, by certain logic, meant that Davek Fel was now the most powerful man in the Empire.

He didn't feel it. As he stood in the wreckage of his life he started to feel something else, something that filled the emptiness that had yawned inside of him at first sight of his burnt-out old home. It wasn't power, but a very limited certainty. He knew what had to be done next. He had no idea what would happen after that, but he knew what had to be done.

"Do you remember the last time we spoke with my father? It was right here." He gestured to a scorched wall and the living room beyond.

"He said the Empire is a question. That is has been since Palpatine died."

"I have an answer." It felt good to say it, liberating. She stared, expecting more. "Not everyone's going to like it. A lot of *Jedi* aren't going to like it. But I need you to stay with me. We need to take the fight to Veers next."

"I know."

"I can't guarantee anyone's safety here. My mother and the children need to go to Ossus. Not *all* the Jedi, but I want them safe."

"Your mother won't like that."

"She won't like a lot of things soon. Neither will Arlen." He could already see the judgment in their eyes. Just imagining hurt, but he could face it later if he survived what came first. "I need you with me, Marasiah. I need you to stay loyal."

"To you?" She raised a brow. "Or to the Empire?"

"Both. We're one in the same. But so are you."

She tilted her head; a question.

"These people need a leader. They need a *symbol* they can put their trust in. Something they can follow, like a guiding star. I can't be that alone. We need to be that symbol together."

She took a breath. "I think I know what you're asking. I don't like it."

"Neither do I. But it has to be done. Otherwise everything my father lived and died for meant nothing."

"Will Arlen see it that way?"

He looked back out the window, at the dark clouds and darker city. "No. But he's not part of the Empire anymore."

"Davek-"

"He chose that. He did. And let's be honest. He never belonged here anyway."

"He's still your brother."

"I know."

She hugged herself a little tighter and looked at the floor. Faint rain pattered the walls. "Are you ready to go?"

No, he thought, and he never would be. But it had to be done. He clicked on his comlink and told the police airspeeder to come

pick him up. He took one last look through the ruined window then walked for the door. As he passed Marasiah he held out his hand. She took it, squeezed, and followed him out of his place of safety forever.

After over a decade as the most powerful woman in the galaxy, Allana still wasn't used to standing on the sidelines, watching drama play out that she couldn't control. The situation on Bastion had been excruciating to follow, not least because so many people she loved were caught in the mess. The Imperial news networks had all been shut down but the Jedi Temple on Ossus retained communication with the Academy on Bastion. They got reports of the siege as it happened, and after the bloody battle they got tallies of dead and wounded, of which none of her family was a part.

Then had come the call from Arlen, direct to Allana from *Starlight Champion*. Information had spilled out of him in a garble but he made clear that Veers had effectively fled Bastion with his super star destroyer and fallen back to Yaga Minor. He also said he was racing out of Imperial Space alone, for reasons he didn't specify, and heading to Balmorra, where his ex-wife and daughter were expecting an appearance by a Sith Lord who'd been daylighting as Retor of Kuhvult.

Allana could picture him from memory: A handsome, fit man about her age with a shaved head and bemused smile. The Kuati aristocrat has been elected Chairman of the KDY Board of Governors during the closing months of her term as Chief of State and had treated her to an embarrassingly elaborate banquet at the Kuati Embassy. According to rumor he'd thrown money behind Kyrr Esch's opponent in the election to succeed Allana, but there'd been no indication he was a Sith.

That, she thought, marked the second time she'd sat down and shared genial conversation with a Sith Lord, suspecting nothing. The second time she knew of. Arlen had assuaged her guilt, saying he'd shared drinks with Retor several times and felt nothing either. It made her feel a little better, but not much.

Arlen had requested a team of Jedi to help him take down Retor and Allana had been happy to send one. She'd been ready to grab her saber and join them- cracked ribs and healing armed be damned- when Arlen had reminded her they were going to be infiltrating a convention full of corporate executives who'd know her on sight.

So she'd diverted one of the teams en route to Bastion, wished Arlen luck, and sat back to wait for more news from Imperial space.

When INN started broadcasting again it was near midnight on her part of Ossus but mid-afternoon on Ravelin. The reporter gave a short preamble, apologizing for the halt in the broadcast and summarizing only a little of what had happened the night before.

Then she announced they were cutting over to a statement by Admiral Davek Fel.

Davek appeared at a podium inside some high-roofed hall. Behind him was a line of people facing forward, hands at their sides. Allana spotted a few Jedi unfamiliar Jedi in brown robes, stormtroopers in white armor, officers in grey uniforms, including a few non-humans. Above the backdrop of people was a wide Imperial crest. It was, she thought, the kind of display to compel both patriotism and obedience.

Davek's face was tired, bags under the eyes, but his posture was straight and his voice was strong. "People of the Empire, I'm speaking to you today from a city scarred by battle. As you've likely heard, Ravelin was the site of unprecedented combat. Imperial soldiers battled Imperial soldiers. Yesterday was a tragedy. The fighting here is over. Bastion is secure, but the war for the Empire's soul is far from over."

He paused, as if gathering thoughts, the continued. "A century ago, the institution we call the Galactic Empire was far different from what we know today. It spanned the entire galaxy and ruled with unprecedented power. It secured safety and security for all its citizens. It also brutalized dissenters. Non-humans were forbidden their deserved rights. Brave Jedi Knights were hunted to near-extinction. That Empire was the creation of one man, and it has not existed since the death of Emperor Palpatine.

"Some still wish it existed. Those men include Corrien Veers, who attempted a second Jedi purge last night. He failed, in no small part thanks to the brave Imperial citizens who took to the streets of Ravelin in support of the knights who've fought and died to protect you all from the raiders. When Veers realized his failure, Supreme Commander Hallis and I gave him a chance to step back from the line he'd crossed and negotiate a truce. Instead Veers has fled the capital and makes camp at Yaga Minor, where even now brave Yagai citizens are fighting for the chance to live as equals in our Empire.

"Veers will be held to account. Those who deny the march of history and seek to change the Empire back to what it was will fail. That is not a statement of my intention, that is a statement of *fact*. The Old Republic died and was replaced by the New Republic. That was replaced in turn by the Galactic Alliance. So it is with us.

"The Galactic Empire must change to survive. Our Empire will not be Palpatine's empire of darkness. It will be an empire of *light*. Every loyal citizen will have to chance to prosper, regardless of species. Order and security will be guaranteed for all. The military, our most trusted institution, will continue to defend these values under the leadership of Supreme Commander Hallis. The Jedi, too, will serve the Empire more closely, more directly than ever before."

Allana sucked in breath. She saw where this was going. Davek plowed ahead, saying, "Some of those who moved against the Jedi Order last night did so in good conscience, because they'd seen evidence, real but falsely presented, to imply that the Jedi had acted against the Empire's interest. As admiral of the Fourth Fleet, I did everything I could to use Jedi Knights from the academy on Bastion. Over these past turbulent months more than twenty of them have died to defend the Empire, over one-fifth of their total number. The Jedi Order based on Ossus exists outside any secular government. Because the Jedi have existed outside the official command structure of the military, they've have sometimes acted outside acknowledged codes of conduct. They have meant well, but sometimes they have skirted Imperial law for greater good.

"Those days are over. I am now announcing that the knights on Bastion will function independent of the leadership on Ossus. We

have no wish to antagonize the Jedi Order. Far from it, we want to remain on the best terms, but all the Jedi in the Empire must remain loyal *to* the Empire above all else. In this way I guarantee our Imperial Knights will protect the Empire as never before."

"Oh, Davek," Allana whispered. There was only one thing left for him to say.

"I tell you this not as admiral of the Fourth Fleet. Today marks the christening of a new Empire and a new leadership, but that empire was not born today. It was born decades ago, when my father Jagged Fel assumed command after the death of Grand Admiral Pellaeon. For the rest of his life Jagged Fel devoted himself to carrying on Pellaeon's ideal of an empire that was as open and equal as it was orderly and safe. He *died* to continue that goal. It was he who made the Empire what it is today, and in his honor I declare myself the *second* Emperor Fel.

"I swear on the blood of my father that I will carry on his legacy. I will make our Empire of light open and equal, orderly and safe. As Emperor I will protect all our citizens from those who would break my father's dream.

"Thank you for listening."

The imagine winked off. The INN reporter reappeared, staring at her audience, stunned beyond words.

Allana killed the transmission. She sat back in the dark of her chambers, uncertain whether to feel encouraged or appalled, knowing only that from this there was no going back: not for the Empire, not for the Jedi, not for a family now divided.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Gevern Auch's battered ship would do them no good, so before going down to Balmorra they rendezvoused with *Starlight Champion* on the edge of the system. They pulled everything they needed to from the crippled vessel: Supplies, weapons, data cards, seven surviving Skiratas and one prisoner.

Arlen was there at the airlock as they carried it all through. He watched them pass, one after another. When his daughter stepped through the portal she was still encased in the red *beskar'gam* she'd borrowed from her cousin. She carried underarm the T-visor helmet she'd not yet worn and her lightsaber dangled from her belt, clanking mournfully against her metal thigh-plate. When she saw her father she stopped in her tracks; Arlen looked down at her, face tired and blank but eyes mournful. Then he bent low and embraced her, arms over hard armor, cheek against cheek.

Tamar watched them but stood apart. She wanted to intrude but knew she had no place here. She should have never agreed to take Marin with her after Broken Moon. She should have sent her daughter off with Arlen. What had happened since could never be undone, and it had changed the girl's life forever. No one should have had to experience what they had over the past few days, not a forty-year-old woman and especially not a fourteen year old.

Mandalorians bragged their kids were adults at fourteen but it was a lie. Jedi, Mando, it didn't matter. Fourteen was still a child.

The other Skiratas and their cargo passed behind her. Dorn lingered, uncertain what to do or where to do. He had Galaset with him, stripped of armor, ankles and wrists in stun cuffs. The Kerestian observed the scene for a moment, then announced in a tired voice, "Will you lock me up or do I have to watch your family drama?"

Dorn pistol-whipped the back of his head but Galaset had a thick skull; he barely flinched. Arlen pulled away from Marin and stepped forward, interposing himself between his daughter and the prisoner. He looked Galaset in his small yellow eyes, then said, "I don't suppose you knew your Mandalore was working for a Sith."

"I didn't, actually." Galaset glanced at Tamar. "Ask your woman. She used her Jedi powers to look inside my head. She knows the truth."

"He's right," Tamar said. Arlen looked at her for the first time. She'd expected reproach but his eyes were still so tired, so sad. "He didn't know about the Sith. Doesn't know who hired him to attack the Chiss either."

"Well," Arlen said, "He can tell that to *them*. Marin, you know the backup storage chamber, the secure one?"

"I remember." She stepped out from behind him.

"Lead the way. Show your uncle where he can keep our guest for a while." That surprised Marin; she looked a question and her father said, "Please. Go to the main hold after that. Your mom and I will be down in a second."

She nodded and started out of the hold without looking back. Dorn hit Galaset again, more for his satisfaction than the Kerestian's pain, and the prison shuffled after Marin. When they were gone the first thing Arlen asked was, "Whose armor? Ninet's?"

"She took a hit."

"I saw that. She'll be okay?"

"Yes. Giving it to Marin was her idea. We thought... The plan was to take Retor together, our ship and Kragal's. Retor got the drop on us, but I guess that's what you'd expect from Sith. He pounded

our ship, Kragal knocked his out with an ion canon. He tried to board. You saw the rest."

"Who died?"

"Nobody you knew. Nobody Marin knew, not for more than an hour." She added, "Nine people, total."

"I'm sorry. Really." He put a hand on her, the spot between armor plated at the base of the neck.

"I know. Thanks." She didn't shirk it away. "I shouldn't have dragged Marin along."

"You had no idea this would happen. And *I* was the one who suggested she go with you, remember?" She hadn't. It had slipped her mind. Arlen squeezed her shoulder a little and added, "She's a good kid. Tougher than she looks. She's seen a lot but she'll get through this and-"

"Arlen, no." She had to pull back. "You don't know the rest of it."

He awkwardly let his hand fall to his side. "What else happened?"

She could only say it: "Marin killed Gevern Auchs."

Arlen stared, his jaw dropped. It was so rare to see him speechless.

"Auchs grabbed me and Dorn on Chorax. Ninet and Marin escaped. They sneaked into his ship, then found the place they were interrogating us. Auchs was standing right next to me with his *beskad* sword and that was the first thing Marin saw when she blew the door. I don't think she even meant to kill the *chakaar*... Just protect me."

He closed his mouth, closed his eyes, took a deep breath. She could feel it all wash over him: shock, regret, anger at Tamar and at himself for not keeping their little girl out of this mess entirely. But she wasn't a little girl anymore, even if she'd been one at the start of this mission, which she hadn't. Now she was something else, something none of them knew, least of all Marin herself.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wish this could all be different."

"Stang it... Auchs had family, didn't he? Those Mando blood-feuds... Who else knows?"

"Me, Dorn, Ninet. And Galaset."

"He's not seeing the outside of a prison cell once I get him to the Chiss. But... Does anyone even know Auch's is dead?"

"Probably not, but they'll figure out soon. Whether they'll trace it to the Skiratas, I don't know, but this could set off a succession war anyway. Galaset says Auch's was trying to keep his thing with us quiet, but you never know who might find out. Listen, nobody else will know Marin killed Auch's. Dorn and Ninet will never tell. Mekk and his kids don't know and if I tell them to they'll keep quiet about Marin ever being here. So that's it. No one else will know. Even if Auch's people come after us they won't come after her."

"Your family's not the only ones I've got aboard," he sighed, "But they're people we can trust all the same."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on. Let's get to the hold. I picked up some friends along the way."

He tugged her lightly by the forearm and started down the hall to *Champion's* largest cabin. As they walked she remembered that he'd just flown out of a mess too. "By the way, what's been going on in Imperial space?"

He sighed again. "The fighting at Bastion's over for now. Veers fled to Yaga Minor. We're looking at a civil war."

"Fierfek. If things are getting worse we should keep Marin off Bastion."

"Well, that was sort of the plan regardless."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's a long story but I think I overstayed my welcome in Imperial space."

She grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Arlen, what are you talking about?"

His eyes were sad but he shrugged her off and kept walking. "I'll explain later. Like I said, I've got some friends waiting."

When Tamar followed him into the hold she understood exactly what he meant. It wasn't every day you saw a dozen beings, six in brown Jedi robes and six in Mandalorian armor, lined up on opposite sides of the room and staring each other off. It was even

rarer than none of them were reaching for their weapons, though a few on both sides looked pretty tempted.

"*Udesii, vode*," Tamar said, holding up both hands. "We're all friends here, right?"

Mekr's scarred face was twisted in a sneer but he crossed his arms over his chest, hands nowhere near his guns. "If you say so. I'm guessing these *jetii* are here to help us bag a Sith."

"Crudely put, but accurate," said a grey-furred old Bothan.

"Master Saav'etu and her team know what needs to be done," Arlen explained.

"Are we trying to capture the Sith or just kill him?" asked Marin. She stood next to Ninet, closest to the Jedi line but not with it.

"Ideally we'd take him captive, but I don't want to risk it. We need to take him out in a way that involves as few civilian casualties as possible."

"Are we even sure he's *there*?" asked Dorn.

Arlen nodded. "I just got a call from Chance Calrissian. He's on Balmorra now and reports Retor is attending the conference. Chance also swung us an invite, so we'll be able to set *Champ* down with no problem. After that we'll have to track Retor, wait until he's in private, and attack. Chance gave us info to help on that too."

"Search and destroy, then," grunted Mekr. "Sounds good to me."

"He's going to be super-wary after what just happened," Ninet pointed out. "Are you sure we'll catch him off guard?"

"No, but we have to try. He'll be even harder to get to when he returns to Kuat or one of his starships."

"We're ready, Dad," Marin said. "We all are."

Arlen stared for a moment at his daughter in that red armor. He took in the determination on her face and the pain she was bleeding out in the Force, and Tamar felt him grieve a little more. After what she'd seen, what she'd done, they couldn't just order Marin to stay safe aboard the ship with Ninet.

Like the rest of them, she needed be there to end it.

* * *

Balmorra had a galaxy-wide reputation as an over-industrialized wasteland of a planet cannibalized by greedy defense corporations. There was some truth to that, but the manicured gardens and handsome ivory buildings in which the convention was being held were proof that pleasant of places were available even here, at least for those with credits to burn.

Damien Corde was usually a man of more modest pleasures, but his work for the Empire had had him masquerading as a classier man on a few occasions. He knew how to wear the suit, how to nibble on roving plates of rare foods, and how to look with casual condescension on the servants who went around offering them. No droid servants at this gathering, he noticed. A little surprising, given how many automatons were assembled in Balmorra's factories, but he supposed using flesh and blood servants, all of them attractive young females from a dozen different humanoid species, was another element of luxury.

As he wandered the grounds of an expansive and manicured garden, walled off and surrounded by elegant hotel-towers and the broad front face of the convention center, he wished Veers had given him more practical instructions on how to find Retor of Kuhvult. He'd assumed, on his way here, that it would be simple enough to find one of the galaxy's richest beings, but there were so many *other* rich beings here and they all either knew each other or were in the process of schmoozing. Damien had been waylaid by two gabbing SoroSuub executives for five minutes before breaking free and continuing on his search.

The search was aggravating, all the more because there was some place else he'd rather be. Before setting off for Balmorra he'd commed Valera. She was still down on Bastion and had listened to him spin another yarn about how he'd be away from the capital on business again, for how long he couldn't say, though it might be longer than ever before. She'd read the severity in his voice and understood. As a farewell she'd given him one last surprise: on her last trip to the doctors she'd been told that their child was going to be a girl. She'd planned to hold onto this information, to tell him in person, but under the circumstances she'd decided to do it now.

A daughter. Somehow that made it all the more real, and everything that followed all the more awful. On the ride to Balmorra he'd watched the events over the capital with shock and horror. He'd tried calling Valera but no message had gone through. They said there was jamming and downed communications equipment messing up communications with Ravelin; they also said fighting had taken place in the city, causing extensive damage and racking up uncounted casualties. In all the jobs he'd done, all the times he'd trusted in his superiors or other agents to keep him alive, he'd never felt as helpless as this.

As he wandered the gardens and maneuvered around all the chattering suits his eyes were drawn to one body far bigger than the others. The Hutt on that repulsorsled must have been ten meters from head to wiggling tail. He wandered toward it, more curious than anything; he'd thought a gathering this prestigious would filter out the overtly criminal elements.

As he got closer he started circling around from behind the Hutt to get a better look at the beings it was talking to. The bloated alien was rumbling on in slurred but accurate Basic, saying, "I cannot tell you how grateful I am for the invitation, Chairman. I applied for attendance once before, oh, forty standard years ago, and I was refused."

"Well, I admit I had some extra strings I could pull," a voice said: deep, smooth, familiar.

"And I am grateful! Because they gave no explanation for their refusal. But we all know the reason. Rank prejudice. Unthinking assumptions about my business based solely on species. I had a mind to bring them to court for it, but the Alliance wouldn't pass better anti-discrimination legislation for another, hoom, fifteen years..."

"Well, I'm very glad that's in the past," said Retor of Kuhvult. He was standing in front of the Hutt with a glass of wine in his hand, dressed in those folded Kuati robes and smiling the superficial smile of the rich. Next to him was another human with darker complexion in a nice business suit, plus a pair of gaunt, pale Muuns.

The second human turned to the Muuns and said, with the air of a man eager to change the subject, "So I have to ask, what's been happening on Muunilist the past day or two?"

The two aliens exchanged looks, and a part of Damien really was curious as to what was happening in the financial center of Imperial space, but he took the opening to slip in between the Hutt and Retor.

"Chairman, it's so good to see you!" he said, grinning. "It's been weeks since we last talked."

Retor's eyes lit on him and he returned the easy smile. "Ah, Mister Blackmor, welcome. I wasn't sure you'd make it."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for all the ryll on Ryloth. It's not often we get so many people of this caliber in the same place at once."

The other human leaned in and extended a hand. "How do you do? I'm Chance Calrissian and this is my partner, Volgma."

"Charmed," the Hutt rumbled.

Damien shook Calrissian's hand and looked back to Retor. He didn't want to dawdle but he didn't want to step out awkwardly either. "Chairman, are you free right now? There's something I'd really like to speak with you about before my presentation this afternoon."

"Of course, I have the next hour free." Retor looked at the others. "If you'll excuse me, friends, I have some business I need to talk to Mister Blackmor about."

"Of course," said Calrissian. "Maybe we'll talk later."

"I'll see if I can spare the time," Damien said, and eagerly let Retor lead him through the crowd. The servants and suits who'd clustered around him on all sides, he noticed, cleared the way for the chairman like a succession of opening doors.

It would be good to keep up appearances until they were in private, so Damien said, "I'm sorry for interrupting like that, but I figured we'd best connect as soon as possible. I trust I didn't inconvenience you?"

"Oh, not at all. Thank you again for coming."

He was tempted to ask how Retor knew his most recent code name; possibly the man was also Veers' contact to the Mandalorians

and had heard from Auchs or Galaset. That was something else he could ask later.

"I trust we're going somewhere private," Damien said.

"Oh, don't worry, I have half a floor in one of the hotels reserved. We can get quite comfortable there."

"I'm glad to hear that. I have to say, I've had a less-than-enjoyable ride here."

Retor sighed, "Mister Blackmor, I should tell *you* stories."

Arlen wasn't used to crisp business suits and the one Yaqeel Saav'etu had found on hastily procured was also a size too small for him. He wanted to tear the thing off, or at least undo two latches on his collar before it choked him, but he kept up the presentable appearance as he and the Bothan Master worked their way through the crowd of mingling business-beings in the garden. Yaqeel actually looked more professional than him with her graying fur perfectly groomed and her traditional Bothan robes flowing elegantly behind her. The other five Jedi, also in formal wear, were scattering through the crowd, searching with their eyes as much as the Force for their target.

His biggest worries when wandering into the crowd was bumping into Retor of Kuhvult suddenly, or being spotted by the Sith first. Quite possibly Retor could sense the seven Jedi in his midst already; he'd certainly know Arlen by sight and understand his purpose. He was frankly a little surprised Retor had kept his appointment at this conference after his near-fatal battle with the Mandalorians, but he supposed being lord of the military-industrial complex had as many responsibilities as being a Sith.

Despite his tall statue and bald pate, Retor would still be tricky to spot amidst all these people moving in and out and around the garden's manicured hedges. Someone else was much easier to find, and one he did Arlen cut the straightest line possible to Volgma the Hutt.

Chance was there too, and he and his business partner were speaking with a pair of bankers. The Muuns' small eyes widened

when they spotted him, maybe with recognition; Arlen was the most well-known Jedi in the Empire after Davek's wife.

Chance, though, immediately pulled Arlen in for a shake and backslap.

"Good to see you, friend," Chance grinned. "I was wondering when you'd make it."

"Yeah, well, a lot of stuff happened on the way here."

"I'd love to hear about it, but I've got stuff for you first." Chance looked over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, gents, but I've got to catch up with my friend here."

"Ah, your friend-" started a Muun. "Is that-"

"Vuffi Raa. Haven't you heard of him? Owns a very impressive missile factory on Denon. Come on, Vuffi, let's talk."

Volgma was about to rumble something but thought better of it. Chance dragged Arlen to a quiet spot against a hedge-wall and Yaqeel followed.

"Vuffi Raa? Wasn't that some annoying droid your dad owned?"

"I dunno, it was the first thing I thought of."

"Gee, I'm flattered." Arlen sighed. "By the way, this is Master Saav'etu."

"Charmed." Chance nodded at the Bothan then turned back to Arlen. "Retor is here, but he wandered off. You just missed him by ten, fifteen minutes."

"Wandered where?"

"I don't know. Sounded like he wanted to have a private talk with the guy."

"What guy?"

"I don't know. Said his name was, um, Blackmor."

"*Blackmor*?" Memory rattled. "About my age, short blond hair, fit-looking?"

"Yeah, that sounds right." Chance frowned. "Who is he?"

A man whose live capture might determine the course of history. His mind did fast recalibration. This was no longer a search and destroy mission, this was a search and retrieve, and the precious cargo they needed to grab was currently in the hands of a Sith.

"Listen, I've got to ask," Chance said, and leaned in close. "Retor of Kuhvult. A Sith. Karking *really*?"

"He just killed a whole shipful of Mandalorians with a lightsaber and some Force lightning," Yaqeel said grimly. "We've seen a recording."

"Yeah, but... Retor?" Chance wagged his head back and forth. "I've known him for twenty years! He's a... Well, he'd not a *great* guy but compared to some of the other sleemos running megacorps he's not bad. Back when he was on Coruscant we used to go drinking. We used to play *sabacc* together!"

"Well, I guess even Sith Lords have hobbies."

"But I always *beat* him. How does a Sith keep losing card games?"

Arlen sighed; they didn't have time for this. "Maybe he lost on purpose. Maybe he was using you, maybe he got to me."

"Yeah, but... All this time?"

"Chance, in the five total minutes I've had to spare in the past few days, I did some thinking. Remember that first time we went to Broken Moon? Remember how Krux knew we were coming?"

"Yeah. We figured what's 'name, Greshk, tipped him off."

"But we never found out, remember? Greshk was dead by the time we got back to Coruscant to confront him. Suicide, they said. But who was taking us back and knew we were after Greshk? Retor. Who else could have known you were going out to Broken Moon with me? Retor."

Chance shook his head. "You remember all that? That was seventeen years ago."

"Well, I got a kid out of it so it's still kind of a big deal. Listen, did you check what I asked you to?"

He nodded, expression clear. "Yes, I did. Had to bribe a hotel clerk, but I found out he's staying on the south half of floor seventeen on that hotel right there." He pointed to an elegant mid-rise looking down on the garden. About twenty floors, white exterior, broad blue-tinted windows.

"He's rented half the floor?"

"I was surprised he didn't take the whole thing. Listen, I had to talk to him for a good ten minutes. Actually Volgma did most of the talking, but what if he read my mind? What if he knows you're coming?"

"We have to go after him anyway. And don't worry, we brought plenty of help."

"So you're going? Now?"

"We don't have time to waste," said Yaqeel.

Chance's eyes got the grave, questioning look. Arlen slapped him on the shoulder and said with fake confidence, "Don't worry, we brought enough people to handle one rich guy."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't worried about you," Chance said, more fake bravado. "If you kill him, what does this do to my contract with KDY?"

"Don't you have lawyers to figure that out?"

"Yeah, but they're not used to seeing clauses voided by Sith Lords."

"Get better lawyers, then. Later." He patted his friend on the shoulder and hurried back through the crowd as quickly as he could without drawing attention. Behind him Yaqeel reached out with the Force to touch the minds of the other Jedi searching the garden, but Arlen had to do more direct communication.

He fished his comlink out of his too-tight jacket pocket and asked, "Tamar, you getting this?"

"Load and clear."

"Get ready to move. I've got a location."

"Great."

"Not great. Turns out we've got a change of plans too..."

The real name of Veers' agent was Damien Corde. That was one of the first thing Kroan pried from his prisoners' brain, and it took more effort than he was used to. As the moff had once bragged, Imperial spies had tougher minds than normal vermin's.

But in the end, he broke. Corde slumped in the chair Kroan had bound him to, a simple straight-backed one mildly incongruous against the softer, more luxurious sofas in the hotel's living room.

The floor-to-ceiling windows looked out on the gardens far below. Clear sunlight fell through, highlighting the smeared sweat and fresh bruises on Corde's face.

Kroan gave him another backhanded slap and the spy straightened. His eyes rolled up to catch the Sith Lord's and Kroan could feel angry defiance coming off him in the Force. At first there'd been just confusion. He'd believed in Corrien Veers with an earnestness as amusing as it was pathetic, and his mind had stubbornly refused to accept that he'd been delivered to anything but safety. That Veers actually *had* intended to shield his man added delicious irony to it all.

"That's right, Agent Corde," Kroan purred and squeezed the man's chin with three strong fingers. "There's no helping you now. You're going to tell me what I need to know, whether you want to or not."

"You.... What *are* you?" he panted.

Kroan pondered telling him the truth. There'd be no harm; once their talk was over he'd kill Corde. He'd already made arrangement to dispose of the body. Still, he felt there were better ways to play with the man.

"Your dear Moff Veers sent you to me because he thought you were keeping secrets," Kroan lied. "Are you keeping secrets, Agent Corde?"

"No... No secrets. He wouldn't...."

"Of course he wouldn't give you up." Kroan slapped him again. "Just like he wouldn't arrange Avaris' assassination. Just like he wouldn't drag the Chiss into a war to help the Empire."

"No," Corde waved his head stubbornly back and forth. "He didn't kill Avaris. He couldn't have."

"Of course he did. Veers has wanted to run the Empire for a long time. Don't pretend you didn't notice. I helped him then and I'm helping him now. I'm helping him get rid of *you*."

Kroan could feel horror take hold of the battered man. He could feel Corde's spirit crumble. All vermin told themselves fictions to make it through their petty, pointless lives. This spy had told himself he was a loyal servant to the man who'd return the

Empire to greatness. Now the lies were being stripped away and he was realizing, painfully, that the man was just a power-hungry killer and himself a fool.

His agony was delicious. After all he'd been through in the past few days, Kroan deserved to savor it. He took a deep breath and ran a hand softly, almost fondly, through Corde's hair.

The spy shuddered beneath his caress. "I don't... understand... What *are* you?"

Kroan smiled with honest fondness; this fool was giving him well-deserved pleasure. "For an old-style Imperial, Agent Corde, you should know. The Empire you love was once of an empire of the Sith."

Some vermin didn't even know what the word meant, but Corde did. More awful realization bled through the Force and showed on his face. Kroan was tempted to toy with him a little more before ripping his mind apart and seeing what Veers was plotting behind his back.

A loud crash sounded behind him. He spun and looked around: an entire section of the ceiling had fallen in and smashed onto the sofa on the far side of the room. Chalky dust filled the air but Kroan pushed it aside with a thought. At the same time he felt the three beings standing before him, all Jedi grim with determination. In the middle, wearing powder-coated black trousers and a white shirt unbuttoned in the front, was Arlen Fel.

In savoring Corde's pain Kroan had lost himself. He'd let his guard down.

He sensed more Jedi too, closing in. He called his lightsaber to his hand ignited it, but as Fel approached he threw out a blast of Force lighting. The Jedi caught it on his saber while the other two knights- a human woman and an orange-blue Togruta- charged.

At the same time the wall to his right burst open under another push of Force energy. He felt it coming and blocked the debris that went flying his way. Three more Jedi charged into the room, a Bothan in the lead.

The group of Mandalorians had been a challenge but they'd been vermin. A group of Jedi presented another level threat entirely.

He backed to the window. The Bothan's group was moving right for Corde, still strapped in his chair, half-conscious and confused. Kroan realized in an instant that they were after the spy and knew he had to stop them, even if he couldn't fight off all six thereafter.

He threw another blast of Force lightning. The Bothan blocked it with her saber but the two knights behind her were caught off-guard and knocked back, energy sizzling over their bodies. Kroan leaped back to Corde, saber held high, ready to deny the Jedi their prize with one easy sweep.

Before he brought the blade down he sensed it. The Jedi ducked to the ground as one. Kroan spun to face the windows and raised a shield of Force energy just as they exploded in a rain of glass, punched through by laserfire.

They'd repelled down from the rooftop in one smooth motion. Marin used the Force to smooth her descent but she wished it could smooth her nerves too. The *beskar'gam* felt heavy and tight all around, secure but constraining the way a plain Jedi tunic never was. The T-visor helmet squeezing her head rasped with her own breath and her mother's voice was loud and scratchy as she gave orders to the five other Skiratas who'd come with her to take down Retor.

The Mandos around her were thinking of vengeance for their dead. Marin could feel that clearly through the Force. All she wanted to do was fight with her parents and protect them, even as she knew they'd protect her more. She couldn't sit this out, though, not after everything that had happened. Not after the people- the *family*- this Sith had killed.

When they fell down to floor seventeen, boots against the narrow white ledge of the floor-to-ceiling windows, Tamar called for guns out. Marin had just brought her saber but the other Mandos drew out pistol in one-handed grips, pointed them at the glass straight ahead, and fired right before the man with the red saber could decapitate the prison in his chair. He raised one hand instead, blocking the glass shards and laserfire that tore through

into the hotel room. With five Mandos firing at once even the Sith struggled to block them, and he shifted his red saber to deflect more shots back.

Retor was a swirl of colorful Kuati robes as he danced back from the spy, battling back a rain of rifle-fire as he did so. He stopped right beside a Jedi struggling to stand and cleaved him through the waist with a single blow. Marin felt anger from the other Jedi but nor from her father, who bounded across the carpet of shattered glass to meet the Sith.

Their bodies nearly collided; their sabers clashed. Red and blue flashed and sizzled as they spun around the room. Master Saav'etu could only jump out of the way. Tamar called for the other Mandalorians to hold their fire lest they shoot Arlen.

"Marin!" she snapped. "Get the package out of here! Go!"

She tore her eyes off her father and Sith Lord and saw the spy they'd been hunting since Broken Moon. His face was bruised by the beating Retor had given him but it was the same man. Marin hurried over to him and sliced his bonds with a few quick flicks of her lightsaber.

"I'll take him, *Mar'ika*." Suddenly Dorn was behind her. He bent low, scooped up the spy, and threw him roughly over his shoulder.

A burst of Force lighting pulled Marin's attention away. She saw her father knocked back, energy sparking over body. Saav'etu and another Jedi charged but Retor forced them back with another blast they caught on their sabers.

Then he pivoted, saw Dorn and the spy, and thrust out his hand. Marin knew what was coming. So did Tamar. They called on the Force to block the gust of invisible energy that would have picked up Dorn and his captive and thrown them out the window into seventeen-story plunge. As it was the Mando was knocked off his feet and the prisoner spilled out on the floor, but they didn't fall.

By then Arlen was back attacking. So was Saav'etu. The two masters came at Retor from either side and he could barely fight both at once. The Bothan's blade skimmed his shoulder and he let out a groan. He spun back in another swirl of robes, toward the window, and when he had a seconds' distance between him and the

Jedi, he unleashed another blast of Force energy. The masters struggled to deflect it with their sabers; at the same time the Togruta Jedi who'd come with Arlen tried to lunge in from the side.

Retor stopped his burst of lightning long enough to duck her thrust. She overextended and he took off her head with a horizontal swipe. By then the two Masters were on him again, backing him toward the shattered window. Retor released more lightning but the Jedi caught it their sabers and pressed back. Marin watched as crackling energy reached back and ran across Retor's face. It danced over his scalp, seared his skin, burned darkness beneath eyes that went bloodshot as she watched.

And then he was flying back, through the open window. The remaining Jedi ran to the edge. Marin joined the Mandalorians, a few of whom pulled out their rifles and shot downward at the ball of sizzling blue that fell toward the greenery below; slower, Marin thought, than it should have.

Then the energy winked out. Faint smoke rose from the cluster of ornamental trees that ringed the base of the hotel. Marin heard shouts from the gardens beyond.

"He's still out there!" Her father said and plucked a comlink from his trouser pocket. He immediately barked into, "Chance, he got away! Tell security they need to find him, now! Yes, Retor of Kuhvult!"

He shut off the comlink, swore, and took in the scene around him. A carpet of broken glass glimmered in the sun-bright hotel room. Two Jedi lay dead. Dorn was just how rising to his feet and hauling the battered prisoner over to a couch. Marin bent over and brushed it clean of glass. Her uncle threw him down.

Tamar wrenched off her helmet, shook hair from her sweaty face, and told Arlen, "We're both too old for this *osik*. You know that, right?"

Once somebody picked him off the floor and sat him up on a sofa, the world around Damien started to make sense. He didn't like what he saw. After what Retor of Kuhvult had done to his mind,

after what he'd been shown, he didn't think he'd like the look of anything again.

Whatever Retor had done to him had turned the world into a mess. He tried to focus on the blurry sights and muffled sounds. It was better than thinking on what Veers had done to Avaris, to the Empire. To him.

He was a career spy. He knew he was expendable. His job was to be more loyal to the Empire than the Empire was to him. This hurt more than it should have. It was betrayal: professional, personal.

He heard footsteps and new voices. He lifted his head and blinked some clarity to his vision. The man with the short dark beard. The black-haired woman with Mandalorian helmet tucked underarm. He knew them from before. The darker man was new.

The woman nodded at him. "Chance."

"Tamar."

"Been a while."

"No offense, but I hate it when we run into each other."

"None taken. I hate it too."

The darker man looked at the lighter one. "I just got off the comm with the police. They can't find Retor."

"He just fell from a seventeen-story window in a ball of blue lightning," the woman said. "How could they miss him?"

"I don't know, but they say there's no trace of him."

"*Shabla* unbelievable."

Two more people came into view: a furry Bothan, another human in armor. Red plates, shorter, helmet off. The figure leaned close to Damien and her face came into better focus. She was just a girl. Soft dark eyes met his and went hard.

"Any idea what Retor was doing with his guy?" asked the dark man.

"No, but it didn't look pretty," the woman said.

"Probably just a warm-up for what the Chiss lined up," the bearded one said.

"Wait..." Damien rasped. Just when he thought it couldn't get worse, it did. "You say... *Chiss*?"

"That's right," the girl said. Her voice was as hard as those eyes. "We've been looking for you for a long time."

The girl pulled back, between the woman and the bearded man. The latter looked down at Damien but spoke to his friends. "We need to get him back to my ship before security comes and starts asking questions. My aunt's going to want to talk to this guy as soon as possible."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

When consciousness returned Jade still thought she was dreaming. Scattered images of her husband, her sons, her father and grandfather and the shifting face of a Chiss moved around her, blurred as though by fog, and when they dissolved to nothing they were replaced by the flashing, shapeless flow of light and color, white and blue, like the view of hyperspace from inside a ship. After some time she realized she *was* looking at hyperspace with the blurred, confused eyes of someone emerging from a deep sleep. She felt the tingling return of sensation to her body, down her arms and legs, and realized it hadn't been sleep but a stun blast.

Then she remembered the fight with Darth Terrid beneath the planet's surface, the violence and the slaughter. She realized she was laying on a hard flat metal deck, and stun cuffs were around her wrists. She shifted; the view of hyperspace panned away and she saw the white ceiling of whatever cabin she was in. It was gently curved, like the interior of a Mon Calamari vessel.

Two figures suddenly loomed over her, one on either side, and she thought she was dreaming again. One was Darth Terrid, Ran'wharn'csapla, and she could feel him in the Force: cold anger, ruthless intent, and beneath that confusion and fear. Her eyes

shifted to the other person. She didn't believe it. She blinked focus to her vision but he saw still there: her husband Jodram, watching her without expression.

She couldn't feel him in the Force at all.

She wished she was dreaming, because the awful reality she'd tried so hard to deny down on the planet was finally taking shape. She stared up at Jodram's so-familiar face, into the eyes that had watched hers since they were children. The light in them was gone; blue irises ringed dark pupils and the pupils themselves, though tiny, seemed wide and black as space. She stared at them until she saw the faint twinkle of distant stars and then, horribly, she knew.

"Welcome back, Jedi Skywalker," Abeloth said. It was Jodram's voice, even Jodram's intonation. That made it so much worse.

She forced herself upright and stared at the thing in anger. She couldn't help herself; this was not just mockery, this was abuse and vile degradation of the man she'd loved, the best man she'd ever known. Abeloth sensed that rage and smiled. She watched Jodram's face, familiar in every inch, distort somehow, so his smile grew wider and wider, revealing a mouth lined with small sharp teeth.

"Jodram is gone," Darth Terrid spoke at last. "There's only *her* now."

"What are you, her slave?" Jade snapped. "How *could* you? You know what she is, what she'll do!"

The Chiss didn't deny it. He didn't even look at Abeloth, though Jade could feel he wanted to be as far from that abomination as he could. Stiffly he said, "We are *all* her slaves now."

Jade looked around the entire room now. It was the personal cabin of *Mon Remora's* captain. She, Lowbacca, Ohali, and Colonel Horn had spoken with the woman after leaving Karn'erath. She recognized the broad forward viewport through which hyperspace flashed, the desk and chair, the broad sofa, the captain's personal communications console.

"You've taken over the whole ship. How did you-" She stopped herself. There was no point in asking. Abeloth took what Abeloth wanted. She'd taken a shuttle, probably the Alliance troop carrier. Posing as Jodram she'd gained clearance to land. With the help of

Terrid and her Erath slaves she'd seized control of the mighty warship and flung it into hyperspace.

Jade forced herself to look at Abeloth's face. "What did you do to Lowbacca and the others?"

"Once I brought you aboard," Terrid said, "She initiated a jump to hyperspace and left them behind."

Jade had been afraid she'd used *Mon Melora's* guns to vaporize the entire planet's surface. "How merciful," she muttered.

"Not mercy," Abeloth said, with Jodram's voice. "They'll make their way back to the rest of their kind. They'll spread stories about what happened to them. The entire Jedi Order will be stricken with fear."

"You don't know Jedi," Jade said, trying for confidence she didn't feel.

"I know *you*, Jade Skywalker, just like I knew your father and grandfather."

Abeloth crouched and reached out. Jade turned her face away but felt a soft touch from her husband's hands, so gentle on her cheek. She shuddered uncontrollably; she wanted to strike it, scream loud, and break down crying all at once.

"He lives in me, you know," Abeloth hissed. "All his memories of you. He doesn't feel grateful but he should. In becoming a part of me he's joined a power greater than anything he could have ever reached as a second-rate Jedi."

Jade remembered how Abeloth had possessed the bodies of one of her grandfather's lost loves. Luke had been able to reach out to his Callista and wrench her soul out from Abeloth's, granting it release and blessed oblivion. Even if Jade had the Force strength of her grandfather she couldn't bring herself to search for any shade of Jodram inside Abeloth now. The Jedi had always called her an *abomination* but she'd never realized the true horror of what she was until now, when she wore Jodram's face and defiled everything Jade and her husband had shared.

Abeloth withdrew the hand but Jade refused to look back at her. Instead she stared at Darth Terrid's waist and staring saw two sabers dangling from his belt. She knew both. One was her own. The other

was the same metal cylinder Wharn had built and used as an apprentice all those years ago, now refashioned with the blood-red blade of a Sith.

Realization hit her. She spun around, looked at Abeloth, and saw the Mortis dagger bound at Jodram's hip. Abeloth placed a hand on its hilt, stroked it.

"You can't kill me," Jodram's voice said. "Nothing can kill me."

"Where are we going?" Jade still refused to look at her face.

"I'm going to deliver a message," Abeloth said. "This galaxy needs to learn to fear me again."

"Why do you need *us*?"

"After we deliver the message, we three will be going elsewhere."

"Where?" She looked back at Terrid. "Do you know?"

Stiffly, the Chiss shook his head.

"We'll be going to a world like the one we left, but greater," said Abeloth. "And then we three will be joined together. Forever."

That triggered another memory, but Jade couldn't place it exactly. Something her father had told her. She forced herself to look up at Jodram's face. The wide toothy smile had shrunk but the starlight gleam within those eyes had grown brighter.

To go to all this trouble Abeloth needed her. She hadn't figured the specifics exactly, but she knew that much.

She tried very hard not to look at the communications console near the captain's desk. Before going down to the planet she'd recorded an emergency message and left it in *Mon Melora*'s computer. She'd done so on that very console. In case of an emergency the captain had been ordered to send the message, which would route directly to her cousin Allana and also activate a tracker aboard *Mon Melora* that would broadcast the warship's location to the Jedi on Ossus.

Jade didn't know if the message had been sent. If it hadn't, she needed to send the warning now.

Abeloth was powerful but not *all*-powerful. Her bodies could be killed; she could be distracted.

Jade started to rise, exaggerating the shakiness of her already-wobbly legs. Neither Abeloth nor Terrid moved to touch her, which was well and good.

She reached out with the Force and found two familiar switches: one on the captain's comm console and one on her own lightsaber.

She pressed both at once. The sudden extension of her violet light-blade burned through part of Terrid's trouser-leg. He gave an un-Sith-like yelp and jumped back. Jade called the lightsaber to her hands, stretching them out to clasp it, but was taken by the hard sudden slap of Abeloth's ghostly tentacle. Pain blossomed in her skull and she collapsed on the floor. It was over as quickly as it started.

"Pathetic," Jodram's voice sneered. "If you're planning to escape from me, you need to choose your timing better."

Jade rolled onto her back and winced to hide her relief. Abeloth said nothing about the comm signal; she hadn't noticed it being sent.

"I'm undamaged," Terrid commented.

"Good. I suggest you keep a close eye on her. I'm going down to the bridge to prepare for our arrival." Jade watched as Abeloth stepped right over her, then rolled to one side and watched Jodram's dirty boots stomp across the deck toward the exit. Before stopping Abeloth turned and gave her one last look.

"Do not let her get the better of you again, or I'll find someone *else* to suit my purpose."

"Of course," Terrid glowered.

Then she turned and was gone. Jade forced her thoughts away from the comm signal and pushed herself so she sat upright again. When she looked up it was still there, looming over her, promising nothing but pain: a second face, transformed into twisted mockery of what she'd known.

Kyrr Esch was normally a model of diplomatic tact, but as she talked to him via the Jedi temple's comm system Allana could tell

the goodwill she'd gotten from warning about her Coruscant vision had been totally evaporated.

"Allana, you must *not* underestimate the severity of this," the chief of state told her. "The Kuati embassy is putting together a legal case against the Jedi Order. They will have you tried in Alliance courts for the *murder* of their Chief Executive Officer!"

"They can't charge us for murder if they can't find a body."

"The Kuatis can buy lawyers who can charge and win on *any* grounds. Why didn't the Jedi ask for permission from Balmorran law enforcement? This is *exactly* the kind of situation we've worked for decades to prevent."

"There was no time. We had to act as quickly as possible. Retor of Kuhvult was a *Sith*."

"Tsi?" Esch sucked in breath. "How do you know this?"

"We have a video recording of Retor with a flashy red lightsaber, slaughtering a roomful of Mandalorians."

"You Jedi work with *Mandalorians* now?"

She sighed. "It's a long story."

"The Kuati lawyers want to hear all of it so they can pick it apart. Or they'll claim your video is a fraud, or irrelevant." The Mrlssi gave another whistling sigh. "*Please*, Allana, the entire Jedi Order must act very carefully. If popular opinion decides that the Jedi assassinated one of the most important businessmen in the galaxy it would ruin the goodwill the Order has been building for decades."

"I know," she said heavily. So much of her years as Chief of State had been aimed at building that bridge and strengthening it. The events on Balmorra were a crack, a major one, but she believed the damage could be contained.

She tried to force the conversation on a different track by asking, "Has the Alliance decided whether to recognize Davek Fel as the Empire's leader?"

"Tsi, that is uncertain. My advisors say to wait at least until the situation at Yaga Minor had been resolved. I'm included to agree."

That didn't surprise Allana. In Esch's position she'd have done much the same. The situation in Imperial space was too volatile for

anyone to guess whether Davek or Veers would come out on top. The one certain thing was that whoever won, the democratic Empire that Jagged Fel had spent decades building was done for. Allana would much rather deal with Davek as emperor than Veers, but it broke her heart to have to make that choice. Davek might be thinking he was safeguarding his father's legacy but the Jag she'd known all her life would never have seen it that way.

Esch opened his mouth to say something else, but a red beacon lit up on Allana's console, marking an emergency call. From Lowbacca and Jade's expedition, she thought, and probably nothing good. Bracing herself, she said, "One minute, Kyrr, please," and switched the channel.

The Mrlssi's holo-image winked out and was replaced by a head-and-shoulders shot of Jade, but a small light at the bottom of the display marked this as a recording instead of a live transmission so Allana resigned herself to merely watching.

"Allana, this record is being sent by *Mon Melora*'s captain," said Jade. "We told him only to send this if he lost contact with all Jedi on the strike team. Allana, we left Tekli and her healers on Karn'erath and followed a lead to where we think Abeloth is. In sending this message we've activated a tracer beacon on *Mon Melora* so you'll know where to reach us. I wish I could tell you more, but I can't.

"Do what you think is right, Allana."

And with that, the holo winked out. Another light blinked on the console, asking if she wanted to open the data package attached to the transmission. Allana did just that; a spatial map of the galaxy sprung up in front of her, with a red light tracking *Mon Melora*. To her surprise, the ship was no longer in the heart of the Unknown Regions. It was actually closer to the Core, and when she checked the readout she saw that it was moving inbound at maximum lightspeed.

From its location *Mon Melora* could reach a thousand different star systems, but, with horrible certainty, Allana knew exactly which one. She switched back to her link with the chief of state and asked, "Kyrr, when did you last hear from *Mon Melora*?"

Esch twitched his head. "Over a day ago. They were leaving Karn'erath with your Jedi aboard."

"This ship is heading for Coruscant. You need to intercept and stop it."

"Allana, I—"

"My *vision*, Kyrr. Abeloth is on that ship and she's coming for Coruscant."

"But how can you—"

"*Please*, be ready to stop that ship. Do *not* let it close to the planet!"

"But Allana..." Esch's big black eyes blinked in confusion as he fumbled for something to say. "Allana... What will *you* do?"

Her mind fell back almost fifty years, when visions of one disaster had driven her determined seven-year-old self to stow away on the *Millennium Falcon* and ride it from Ossus to Coruscant in an attempt to stop it.

At least now she could do it with better style.

"I'm coming to help," she told Esch, "As fast as I can."

For a long time they sat across from each other, neither speaking. Jade moved over to the sofa and sat with her back to the flash of hyperspace. Darth Terrid pulled a chair in the middle of the cabin and faced her. He unhooked the two lightsabers from his belt and knelt forward with one firmly in either hand. He shifted them in his grip, felt their hard surfaces slide across his palms. This was the same lightsaber she'd built as an apprentice. He was still using the shell from all those years ago too, though with a new red focusing crystal. They both looked familiar, felt familiar in his hands.

"Do you remember?" Jade asked, voice very soft. "That one time we swapped sabers and sparred with each other's weapons?"

He looked up at her, narrowed his eyes. When faced with Jodram he'd wanted to strike the man down for the memories he drew out, the weakness he made Terrid feel inside. Being with Jade brought only more memories and more weakness, but he found he didn't have the urge to hurt her. He didn't know why.

He hated the confusion. He wished they'd both died on that planet. Now he had a live Jade and a twisted mockery of Jodram, both haunting him. The liberation of Darth Avanc's murder felt further away than his Jedi apprentice days. He was more trapped than ever.

"Do you remember?" Jade asked again.

"No," he lied.

"What about that time we took you out under the stars and two moons. Do you remember that?"

"No!" he snapped, too forceful. His hands clenched hard on the sabers.

"Oh, Wharn... I can't imagine what they did to you." Jade's eyes were so sad.

"It doesn't matter. I can't be what I was then, with you and Jodram. Not again, not *ever*. Do you understand that?"

"Are you sure? Or is that just what the Sith told you when they broke you?"

"They did not *break* me. They made me better, *stronger* than the Jedi ever could have."

"Then why are you trembling?"

He sprung to his feet. The lightsabers in his hands sprung to life and he took two long steps, arms spread, then froze. One more step and he could slash both sabers through her neck and snip off her head. She stared at him, unflinching, with just a hint of hope on her face.

He recoiled. She had, in her subtly gentle way, been begging for him to kill her. Jade Skywalker was more guileful than she looked. He'd forgotten that about her.

"You should do it," she whispered. "Then kill yourself. It's better than what she had planned for us."

He had to ask. "Do you know what she intends?"

"I do. I had to think about it, but I remember what my dad told me."

Terrid stepped back and forced himself to sit on the chair opposite her. "Tell me."

She exhaled, slightly deflated. She really had been readying herself to die. "What do you know about Abeloth? What did Darth Avanc tell you?"

"What do you think I need to know?"

"She was mortal once. She lived with three immortal beings called the Ones on a planet in the Maw. The existed within the Force and had incredible power. There was a son who embodied the dark side and a daughter who embodied the light. The father kept balance. Abeloth drank from something called the Font of Power to make her like them. It did, but it twisted her into... what we see now."

"What happened to the Ones?"

"Killed, by a special dagger. Abeloth has it now. Just one stab and it extinguished the spirit in her Night-queen body. Fifty years ago, Abeloth captured my father and a Sith girl. She took them back to her homeworld in the Maw and tried to get them to drink from something she called the Font of Power."

"To become like her?"

"To recreate her family. A son and a daughter, only that time the son would embody the light side of the Force and the daughter the dark side." She leaned forward a little. "I think she's trying to do that again. With us."

Terrid didn't know what to say. It sounded unreal, fantastical, but everything about Abeloth was that way.

"Well," Jade asked, "Do *you* want to drink from the Font of Power and become like her?"

"No." He didn't hide his shudder.

"Then kill me," she said simply. "Then kill yourself, while you still have the weapons to do it."

He shifted the lightsabers in his hands. He balked at the thought; suicide was an act of weakness and despair, the last thing a Sith should do. It would be a better fate than what Abeloth had prepared for them, if what Jade said was true, but still, he couldn't do it. Even before becoming a Sith, even before joining the Jedi, he'd always fought to become a better, stronger version of himself. Jedi and Sith and their tricks and tools had been means toward that

end. There was a core within him that remained uncharged against everything. He understood that, finally.

"That would be surrender," he told Jade. "And I will not surrender."

She looked sadder still. Instead of trying to change his mind she said, "Do you know where she's taking us?"

"No."

"And you don't know what she plans to do when we get there?"

"No. Only... what she told you. About leaving a message."

They fell into silence; there seemed little more to say. Hyperspace continued to flash by. He looked at the light, at his sabers, then back at Jade, who looked at him still, though she seemed to be staring through him, her thoughts elsewhere. He only had to reach out briefly with the Force to know where.

"Tell me," he said, "From what your father and grandfather told you... How much of Jodram is still in her?"

She closed her eyes, swallowed. She was trying to hold back tears. Jade emanated agony and it brought him no joy.

"Too much," she said at last.

Terrid had thought as much. He shifted in his seat so he no longer had to look at her. Whatever awaited them- death or awful transformation- it was at least a better fate than Jodram's.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

By the time the Jedi finally brought him to the Chiss, Damien Corde's mind had cleared and he figured out more or less how he was going to handle things. He knew there was no way out but he figured when they brought him in front of those red-eyed aliens he'd be able to wring one thing out from them he really wanted. If he got that, it would be enough. He wouldn't die happy, but he'd go out a little bit more than the stupid pawn he'd been most his life. That was something.

They transferred him from the Jedi to ship to another one. He didn't see much of either. They locked him in a cell and made him wait, but not for long.

When the door opened they threw him for a loop. First were two Chiss like he'd expected: stoic blue-skinned aliens looking down on him with unreadable glowing red eyes. He didn't get up from his cell's bunk, just looked back at them and tried not to be afraid.

Then they stepped aside and let a human through. She wore the same dark uniform as the aliens, with extra pips on her collar. Her face sagged with age and her hair was wiry and gray. He'd never expected to see her but he could guess who she was easily enough.

He should have expected it, just like he should have expected betrayal.

He stayed on the bunk but sat up a little straighter. "Admiral Wynssa Fel."

"Agent Halcyon Blackmor," she said, "But I doubt that's your real name."

"It's not. Does it matter?"

"Possibly. I need information from you, and I need to present it to the leaders of the Chiss Ascendancy."

"You think I'll just give it to you?"

"Your Mandalorian friend was stubborn. He fought us at every step, but we got what we needed."

"He's no friend of mine. Not surprised, though. In the Empire we have rules about forced confessions. Not viable in court."

"We are not the Empire."

"I've noticed."

"We have audio-visual proof that you solicited the Mandalorians to stage a false flag attack on the Chiss Ascendancy to draw us into the war against the raiders. Thousands of our people died at Cam'co station and even more died at Sevok-358. We will make sure you suffer for every one of those deaths."

"I don't suppose you have rules against overly cruel punishment?"

"We have rules ensuring the well-treatment of our citizens. You aren't one of them."

He had to give a dry laugh. These aliens were more Imperial than the Empire nowadays. "I'll give you credit, Admiral. You know how to threaten a man. But you're wasting your time."

"If we broke the Mandalorian we can break you too."

"You don't have to." He held the old woman's eyes. "I'll tell you what you need, but I want something first."

"I hope you're not begging for leniency. You're in no condition to make requests."

"It's a small one. Won't cost you a thing."

She looked at him like she was trying to read his intent. "What is it?"

"I want to record a message. And I want it to be delivered to a woman on Bastion. I'll give you her name and address in Ravelin. If she's still alive she'll be easy to find."

"That's all?"

"Yes. Get me a recording rod and we can get started."

Fel thought for a moment, then turned and left without a word. The door to his cell hung open, beckoning, but a Chiss guard stood on either side, watching him with those unbearable eyes.

He looked down at his hands. It was going well; he just needed to do a little more. The thought of selling out Veers, so appalling just days ago, felt like nothing now, easier than breathing. When they'd handed him over to the Chiss he'd asked the Jedi if they'd caught the Sith who'd tortured him. They said he was still on the loose. A shame, but there might be some justice in the galaxy yet.

The Chiss version of it sounded harsh. After he'd told them all he could he'd no doubt they'd bring it down hard on Veers. That didn't bother him either. As for his own fate, well, once he said his piece, he'd be okay with whatever came next, so long as the Chiss weren't too cruel.

Fel appeared a few minutes later with a handheld audio recorder. She held it out and Damien took it. The controls were foreign but simple, easy to understand. The woman stood in the doorway and watched. He didn't mind if he had an extra audience, so long as he got this through to the ones who matter.

He'd had a lot of time to think about what he'd say. When he thumbed the recorder on and started talking it all came easily.

"I wish I could tell you this in person, but I don't think they'll let me," he said. "This is the best I can do, and I'm sorry. There's a lot I'm sorry for. Maybe you'll hear some of it, I don't know, but I obeyed orders I shouldn't have. I trusted men and it was a mistake." This part got a little hard. His voice trembled. "That's why I don't think I'll be there to raise our daughter. But you can play this to her when she gets older. She can hear what I have to say. She can remember me this way."

His eyes darted up to the old admiral's. She watched him, face unreadable. "I spent my life in service to the Empire. I believed in

the Empire and I still believe in it. I had a cause and I don't regret that.

"But I believed people I shouldn't have. I thought their cause was the same as mine and I was wrong. I let myself be a tool for other men's ambition. I turned into a pawn for *Sith*. I'm telling this to you both. Act on what you believe. Follow your cause. But don't be anyone's fool."

He paused. That was the most important part, the thing he really wanted his daughter to understand when she grew up with only rumors and Valera's fading memories of what her father had been. What he'd just said about the Empire, about the cause, was true, but it was strange how even that felt immaterial when he thought about the child he'd never know.

He took a breath and started the rest. "Valera, I loved you since the first day I saw you. And as for..." He hesitated. It seemed wrong to speak to a daughter without a name. "Morrigan. That's a good name. My mother's name. She was a good woman, and a patriot. She had more sense than her son. So Morrigan, your father loved you before you were born. Remember that."

Thoughts strayed. Imagination took hold. He started to his picture his daughter- he saw her as a younger Valera- listening to this recording as a child, a teenager, a young woman. He tried to imagine what she might think as she heard his words at every stage and stopped himself. His hand was shaking and tears caught at the edges of his eyes.

He took a few breaths and waited until his voice would be steady. Then he said, "Valera. Morrigan. I wish I could be there for you. And I'm sorry. But I've loved you always. Remember that."

He didn't think he could get much more without his voice breaking. He tapped the recorder off. That was enough. Anything else would ruin it.

He looked back up at the admiral and held out the recorder. She stepped forward and took it in both hands, almost delicately.

"If you cooperate fully," she said, "I believe I can make sure your punishment is... painless."

He wiped his eyes dry. A lightness came over him, a strange sense of freedom. Not because of what she'd just said, though that was good. He'd gotten his words out. He'd said his most important thing.

Still holding the recorder in her hands, Wynssa Fel asked, "Are you ready to begin?"

Damien swallowed. "Okay. Let's get started."

Conventional wisdom in the Imperial officer corps held that any assault on Yaga Minor would be a spectacular form of suicide. It had been the most fortified planet in the Empire for generations and was currently defended by a complex array of nearly one hundred Golan defense platforms, nearly the entirety of Admiral Grave's Second Fleet, and the single most powerful warship in the galaxy.

Veers and his allies could hole up in the system and withstand a siege for months, even years. In that time they could use Yaga Minor's shipyards to rebuild and resupply, and their valiant hold-out against Davek's forces would become a rallying cry for all Veers' sympathizers, a cry that would only grow louder with time.

It was therefore imperative that Davek take Yaga Minor and take it fast. He knew it and his enemies knew it. What he brought with him to the Yaga system was barely more than half the Fourth Fleet, plus a scattering of older destroyers from the First which did not seem to be affected by the executive shutdown command Veers had used at Bastion. His enemies had him outmanned and outgunned, and all they needed to do was defend a single world.

Attacking Yaga Minor would have been suicide, straight up, except for revolt currently taking place among the Yagai workers. Davek's fleet emerged from hyperspace at five different points in the Yaga System and began to converge on their target from all sides. As they did so they ran every scan they could on Yaga Minor and the extensive orbital construction yards and defense emplacements. Davek was taking a gamble, pure and simple, that the Yagai would soften the target from within. If they hadn't, or if Veers and Grave had bloodily put down their revolt and assuming total control of all

the world's defenses, then the battle was as good as lost, and with the battle went the last of the Empire Jagged Fel had tried to build.

Davek tried to keep his mind off his father, his family, the weight of history and the chain of staggering decisions he'd just made. Nothing mattered now except the battle itself. He'd decided to leave Jaeger in command of the *Makati* and plant his flag on the First Fleet's lead vessel.

Sentinel was the oldest ship of its class in Imperial service and the only fleet flagship not to bear the name of a long-dead grand admiral. The *Makati*, the *Teshik*, and the Third Fleet's *Nial Declann* had all been christened to honor the more respectable of Palpatine's elite commanders, as opposed to traitors like Grunger or Zaarin whom even old-style propaganda couldn't whitewash. There was one grand admiral, still largely respected and well-known, whose name had not been dealt out to a ship.

Marasiah had told him once how important gestures and symbols could be. This seemed like a good place to start. Just an hour before leaving Bastion, he'd been granted official approval by Supreme Commander Hallis from his hospital bed to recommission the First Fleet's *Sentinel* as the *Thrawn*. It was with that name that he broadcast a signal, system-wide, declaring his support for the Yagai rebels and his intention of arresting Corrien Veers.

There was no reply at first, even though his enemy must have known he was coming. As the *Thrawn* drew closer its sensors began to get better readings from Yaga Minor. There was, unsurprisingly, a jamming field, which meant that if the Yagai rebels had somehow heard his communication they'd never be able to reply back.

Sensors revealed more, too. More than half of the Golan IV stations around the shipyards seemed to be drifting dead over the planet and sections of the 'Yards themselves seemed dark as well. The rebels, whatever their current status, had indeed crippled major portions of the orbital arrays.

Unfortunately, the Second Fleet seemed unaffected by these problems. As status reports rolled in, he counted over three dozen star destroyers, more than twice the number he'd brought. At the center of them all was Veers' *Invincible*, and floating near the ship

was Admiral Grave's *Osvald Teshik*. That mighty vessel was the same class as the *Thrawn* and *Makati* and an easy match for either.

As Davek's fleet drew close to the planet from all sides, the Second remained in its position, neither moving out to meet the attackers nor huddling closer to the planet. Davek didn't know what that meant, but he didn't like it.

The *Thrawn*'s comm officer announced, "Sir, we're getting a priority hail."

"From whom?" Davek asked.

"From the *Teshik*, ah, sir."

Always sir, never admiral or anything befitting an emperor. Nobody knew how to refer to him. He didn't know how to think of himself. Unless he took control of Yaga Minor, killing or preferably capturing Veers here, his last speech would be just an act of bravado, a shameful historical footnote to put him on par with all the power-mad petty warlords who'd declared themselves emperor after Palpatine's death.

This wasn't about power or pettiness. This was about preserving his father's legacy and saving the Empire from its own demons. He believed in the purity of his intentions, but even that wouldn't save him, not unless he won the battle in front of him.

"Open the link," Davek said as stepped before the comm console. "Let's see who wants to talk."

When the holo materialized before him he recognized the speaker instantly. Leonal Grave's black hair was swept back from his dark face. He stood stiff with hands clasped behind his back, the picture of a stern Imperial officer.

"Admiral," Davek said, "I'm sorry we have to meet like this."

"I'm not sorry for *you*, Mister Fel," Grave replied. "I'm sorry for all the good Imperial soldiers you've brought with you die. They deserve better than an overambitious admiral who let his love for the Jedi cult override his loyalty."

No pretense of decorum, then. Davek did his best dry snort. "That sounds like one of Veers' lines. Did he order you to say that?"

"The Head of State will not give his would-be usurper the respect of speaking directly."

"I'm giving *you* the respect of speaking with you, Admiral. It's not too late to stop this before more good soldiers die."

"Don't pretend you didn't start this," Grave snarled. "The elected Head of State was exercising his emergency powers for the security of the Empire. He was *fully* in his legal rights to do so. Your actions are a treasonous insurrection against your rightful ruler and they will be stopped here."

Some of those lines might have come from Veers, but Davek could hear the honest anger in his voice. Grave had been an old-school Imperial from the start; odds were strong that Veers hadn't involved him in whatever schemes he'd undertaken and simply trusted the man would remain loyal. He'd done something similar with Hallis, and unlike the supreme commander, Grave had stayed true.

Grave truly believed he was fighting for the integrity of the Empire. Almost every soldier on both sides did, and thousands of them were about to die.

It was a tragedy. He couldn't forget that, but he couldn't let it stop him. Making hard sacrifices was something every leader had to do. He'd learned that the hard way on *Voidwalker*, all those years ago, when he'd purposely sacrificed almost twenty stormtroopers to save his entire crew. It had been a necessary but painful act, done for the good of everyone.

This was the same, only on larger scale. There was no possibility of going back; he'd already crossed that line at Bastion and everything flowed from there.

Staring at Grave's holo-image he said, "I'm sorry it had to come to this, Admiral. I truly am."

"Not so sorry you'd surrender and accept responsibility for your criminal actions? We've agreed to offer amnesty to the crews of your ships. Everyone beneath the captains and first officers."

Not 'Head of State Veers' but *we*. Interesting, Davek thought, but irrelevant now. "I was going to offer the same."

"You know my answer."

"And you know mine. Hail me if you change your mind, Admiral." Davek signaled for the comm officer to kill the signal and spun back to the tactical station.

"Tell all ships to begin deployment stage one. All combat vessels are automatic targets. No Golan station should be fired upon unless it fires first. Main priority for all shipbound tactical divisions is to identify sources of jamming. Priority for all forward attack groups is to destroy them. I repeat, all ships, stage one launch *now*."

The *Thrawn's* crew hurried to comply with his orders. Davek spun and looked out the forward viewport, down the star destroyer's long pale prow that was comfortably similar to the *Makati's*. TIE fighters, gunships, and assault shuttle raced forward by the thousands, and Yaga Minor's defenders, numbering even greater, finally moved forward to meet them.

The space around Yaga Minor was so thick with explosions and laserfire that Marasiah had to continually squint through the shaded visor of her helmet as he constantly jerked her control stick one direction, then another, relying on instinct and the Force and her TIE Saber's shields to stay inches away from death.

After leaping out of the *Thrawn's* forward hangar bay, eight Jedi starfighters had charged headlong into the counter-charge of units from the Second Fleet. Marasiah and the other knights locked minds as best they could, sharing sensation and awareness as they wove their TIEs through the tangle of hostile ships toward the bulky orbital stations that surrounded Yaga Minor. Right as they'd departed they'd been given the location of their target by *Thrawn's* tactical team, and just as in battles before they'd raced through the thick of enemy line to find the stations that were broadcasting the jamming signals.

One of those locations swelled before them now. It was a broadcasting transmitter jutting out from one of the orbital stations, and Marasiah's sensors showed it to be heavily shielded. The station had only minimal anti-starfighters guns attached but TIE-Xs swarmed around it to protect, and a pair of *Dart*-class gunships were moving to join the defense.

Marasiah had flown TIE-X interceptors for years, so in a grim way it was fortunate to face them now. She knew their weaknesses: a lack of torpedoes, the way hard maneuvers drained power from shields to strengthen engines, the way a pilot got jerked around when inertial dampeners started to fail.

She gave the signal through the Force, ordered her pilots to break formation and take targets at will. They did just that, most of them releasing one or two torpedoes before breaking into dives and spirals. The torps chased circling TIE-Xs, caught some, and turned them into fast-fading explosions. There were plenty more to kill.

After the initial break and scatter she called Katrin Mull and Yarin Sept to join her. They were her two best pilots, also TIE-X veterans, and the three of them wove nimbly around a flight of attackers, using the Force to anticipate the other pilots' moves and hit them when their shields started to strain under tight maneuvers.

The goal was to knock out the jammers, not kill every other Imperial pilot in sight, so Marasiah signaled for them to follow her for an attack on the transmitter. The defending pilots would be on the look-out for TIE Sabers making long straight runs at the equipment, so they wound carefully close to the machinery, let fly two torpedoes each, then scattered again.

Six torps impacted on the shields at once, but to minimal effect. Marasiah bit back a curse as she wheeled around to take another shot; the payloads on their fighters might not be enough. She glanced at her scanners and spotted relief: a full squadron of TIE Demolishers, with two dozen friendly TIE-Xs for escort, were sweeping into finish the target the Jedi had already softened.

She signaled her pilots to form up again. The bombers could take care of the transmitter; they needed to keep the gunships occupied. The eight Jedi flew right toward the small craft, drawing sprays of quick-fire lasers. Jedi instincts helped now more than ever in sensing where the gunners on those ships were aiming, anticipated their moves, and being somewhere else. As she ducked beneath the blazing engine section of one ship Marasiah spun her TIE nose-over-tail and killed engines. The gunship thrusters flared in her vision and she tapped out a pair of torpedoes that exploded

against the hull a half-second later. Two of the engines winked out and the gunship slowed its approach.

She put more power to her engines and raced back toward the transmitter. With her naked eyes she could see the flare of two dozen concussion missiles shooting straight at the transmitter. Hostile TIE-Xs picked off Demolishers that had just finished their runs; she spotted two bombers burst into flames before their warheads even reached the target. When they hit the shields the first missiles impacted but the rest tore through. She felt a swelling of satisfaction as explosions tore the transmitter apart.

She checked her scanners: the localized jamming field was down, which meant Davek could start broadcasting instructions and call to help to any rebelling Yagai that might be able to listen. Other assault teams were hunting for the remaining jamming devices, and though none of the others had Jedi on their teams they might yet find the transmitters and bring down the signals.

Her feeling of elation lasted just a moment; then half the victorious TIE Demolishers vanished in a chain of fire. She kicked her engines forward to protect the rest and spotted bulky bombers veered hard to escape torpedoes that had locked onto them. Two more Demolishers exploded before Marasiah could spot the TIE Sabers that were ripping them to pieces.

A voice said in her ear: "We should have finished this at Bastion."

She jerked hard to starboard, barely evading a volley of laserfire. Another TIE Saber was right on her tail and she pitched her fighter into a series of loops and twists to evade but the pilot kept up at every turn.

"Remember, *you* started this," the voice hissed.

"Dammit, Korosh!" she snarled and reduced speed, hoping he'd overshoot. He compensated, barely, and had to swerve to keep from knocking his fighter with her own. Marasiah broke hard port this time and dove down toward the shielded superstructure of one of the Golan IV stations. The defense platform didn't raise its guns on any passing target; it seemed like the whole thing was dead in space.

Vull was on her again, splashing lasers on her rear shields. Into her comlink she said, "We don't have to do this! You're fighting the wrong side!"

"I'm defending the legal ruler of the Empire," Vull growled. "You Jedi are backing *another* coup. They were right all along."

She didn't bother to ask who *they* were or retort at all. She tried to pull away, slipping down the Golan's superstructure. Her sensors wailed an alarm to say a torpedo was locked onto her. She had only seconds before it hit and she dipped her fighter lower, lower, lower until she was skimming meters above the station's hull, and the torpedo mimicked her every move.

Then she pulled up, hard, fast. The torp tried to follow, dipped down before before shooting up, and impacted on the station's surface. The explosion flashed behind Marasiah. Vull tore through it and pulled up to chase her but the blast blinded his scanners for a second, and he didn't see Yarin Sept's fighter coming for him until it was too late. His shields were already battered by the explosion he'd flown through and couldn't defend against the pair of proton torpedoes that Sept blasted at close-range.

"Korosh, eject!" she shouted right before the torps hit. Vull tried to throw his fighter into an evasive maneuver right before he was it; the first torp ripped off his port solar panels and sent him into a spin, the second finished him off. Debris spiraled out, some into space, some skimming across the unshielded exterior of the Golan station. She tried to sense if an ejection seat was out there, but she got nothing either way.

"Report, Knight Lead!" Sept called to her.

"I'm fine," she lied, then added, "Good shooting."

"Plenty more hostiles out there."

"Indeed. One me."

The two fighters formed up and pulled upward, back into a space blazing with light and death, where good Imperials kept killing each other by the thousands.

The emergency repairs given to the *Afsheen Makati* before scrambling out of Bilbringi hadn't restored many of the turbolaser

or missiles batteries on its damaged bow, but at least they'd gotten the shield generators working. That, Lukas Briggs thought, was the most important thing.

Most of the enemy jamming field had been taken down, which meant the big star destroyers were moving into the midst of the field of Golan IV defense stations that orbited Yaga Minor. Now that the jamming fields were down all destroyers were broadcasting on a loop a statement by Admiral Fel declaring his support for the Yagai rebels and the offer of an alliance against Veers and the Second Fleet. Lukas wasn't totally enthusiastic about throwing their lot in with a bunch of rebellious aliens but he was even less eager to get killed by Veers and Grave, which meant the plan had his temporary approval. He was pretty sure that was the general consensus among the *Makati's* crew; he'd never staffed the bridge of a star destroyer but he knew the tense concentration of soldiers in combat situations. These crew had it, but underneath it all was a gnawing anxiety. They were killing their own out there; nobody wanted it and there was no excuse for it and nobody was one-hundred-percent certain they were doing the right thing, though Vice Admiral Jaeger did a pretty good job of faking it as he stalked around the bridge barking orders.

The mood started to change when the Yagai got into the game. A couple destroyers from the Fourth were slugging it out with Vice Admiral Renwar's *Tempest*, now firmly on the side of Veers. The Fourth's ships were keeping a careful distance from a silent Golan IV station but Renwar sailed confidently passed it and used it as a barrier to protect her starboard flank while she unleashed her portside guns on her friends-turned-enemies. The Fourth's destroyers- two smaller *Predator*-class ships against Renwar's *Compellor*- were about to fall back when the Golan IV blazed it life. Its guns started firing all at once: torpedoes, turbolasers, concussion missiles, all of them arcing across the short gap between the station and *Tempest*. Renwar had shunted power away from her starboard shields and was defenseless to catch the onslaught that tore great gashes in her hull. The Fourth's ships squeezed her on the other side

until her ship went dead in space, a great and blackened husk with barely anything past the command tower now torn up.

More Golan IVs joined the fray after that. Ten minutes after the destruction of *Tempest*, some twenty-eight Golan stations had started broadcasting their allegiance to Emperor Fel and begun firing on any ship from the Second that got too close. Some of those Golan IVs were deep behind enemy lines but bravely started firing anyway, including one right next to Veers' super star destroyer. *Invincible* returned fire and vaporized the station in minutes, but not before taking enough damage to its aft section that one of its sublight engines went dark.

Twenty-some friendly Golans was still well short of the hundred-some around Yaga Minor. By Lukas' count twenty-five more were actively firing on ships from the Fourth, leaving nearly half of them still dark, apparently under control of neither Veers' people nor the Yagai rebels.

When the order from the *Thrawn* came in to charge deeper, Vice Admiral Jaeger enthusiastically complied.

It was still a slow push deeper into the shipyards. The Second moved more capital ships out to defect. Admiral Grave's *Teshik* finally moved into the fray and headed toward the *Makati*, while *Invincible* began to approach the *Thrawn*. Admiral Fel called more ships into his formation to defend but the *Makati* kept going forward; Jaeger's and Grave's ships were of the same mark and should be evenly matched.

To reach the *Teshik*, Jaeger planned to pin it between a set of friendly Golan stations and the *Makati*'s broadside. To get there they had to fight their way past a pair of smaller destroyers, then slip between a pair of dead Golan stations. The *Teshik* was already moving to evade and flee to a more fitting field of battle and Jaeger ordered thrusters full ahead, lest they lose their quarry. At first Lukas' hopes, and those of the other on the bridge, visible surged. They knocked one attacking destroyer and forced the other to flee, then pushed their nose in between the dead Golan stations at a speed that would allow them to take the *Teshik* fast and hard.

That was when the Golans came alive. One started firing viciously, aiming hundreds of missiles and turbolaser batteries at the weak forward shields on the *Makati's* nose. Jaeger lost a crucial second in hesitation, wondering whether to push through or full back. That was when the second Golan came to life. The combined force of two heavy gunnery stations was too much even for the mighty star destroyer. The shields collapsed the nose forward bow, already badly damaged at Sevok-358 and never fully repaired, began to rip apart.

Jaeger gave the order to reverse course, but there was so little room to maneuver. By the time they'd started backing out of range of the Golan stations, Grave's star destroyer was pushing forward. Cascading power failures ran through the *Makati's* systems; even their engines were struggling to work at full capacity.

A stronger ship was coming for them, and they had no hope to escape.

After a short moment of hope it all started to crumble. Most of the Golan IV stations that had previously been silent suddenly roared to life, all of them unleashing heavy payloads of missiles and turbolaser blasts on ships from the Fourth Fleet now too well inside the defensive grid to escape easily. Admiral Grave's ships, which a moment ago had seemed strewn in disarray over Yaga Minor's orbit, suddenly snapped into precise maneuvers to pin Davek's ships close to gunnery stations that had suddenly turned hostile. Worse of all, some of the friendly Golan stations in the hands of Yagai rebels erupted in massive explosions. Captain Korak's *Nightwatch* took heavy damage from one such burst; another destroyed two frigates outright. Apparently Second Fleet saboteurs were still aboard, determined to destroy what they could not control.

The *Thrawn* managed better than most. When the Golan station closest to it sprung alive the star destroyer turned all its forward guns on it and destroyed it before it could do much damage. The *Makati* looked far worse; it was lurching away from two still-firing Golan stations while the *Teshik* was lurching forward

to overtake it. Without the damage it had sustained the *Makati* had no hope against the healthier ship. With the *Makati* crippled or destroyed, Davek's entire offensive strategy would collapse.

Stark, bitter realization took him. Yaga Minor was a battle he absolutely had to win; Veers merely had to avoid losing. Leonal Grave had known that, planned on that, and used the very framework of the battle to outplay him. He'd gambled in a fight against a better strategist and lost. Now all the soldiers who'd fought with him, stood by him on his made vain quest to save the Empire from itself, would pay the price. Exactly as Grave had warned him.

He was staring at the tactical holo, taking in the horrifying implication of all its green markers surrounded by red ones, when a new set of lights appeared all at once: yellow markers ringing Yaga Minor from all sides like a corona. His first thought was the he was seeing things, going mad. When the lights turned blue he thought the display must be malfunctioning. Then the comm officer cried, "Sir! We're being hailed! It's the Chiss!"

By the time he got over to the communications station the holo-image of Wynssa Fel had appeared. She said, impeccably calm, "Greetings, Emperor Fel. It appears you're in need of assistance."

The statement- so causal and grandiose at once- wrenched a laugh out of his throat. "Aunt Wyn... What are you *doing* here?"

"The Ascendancy has just obtained satisfactory proof that the false flag attack on Cam'co station was engineered by Corrien Veers. It is our desire to bring him to justice."

He didn't know how and he didn't care, but somehow Arlen had come through. It was enough to make him dizzy with relief.

Over his shoulder an officer whispered, "Sir, there's nearly one hundred ships out there!"

"You see my situation," he told his aunt. "You know what I need."

"We're willing to give it. We need recompense for our dead."

"I'm pretty sure Veers is aboard *Invincible*."

"As I said, we'll do what it takes."

He should have known by now never to doubt the Chiss' cold determination. He looked at the mess of the tactical holo: the brawling green and red and the fast-closing corona of blue.

"We'll start feeding you our tactical data so you know friend from foe," he told his aunt. "Stand by to attack. I need to make one call first."

The moment the link shut off her ordered the comm lieutenant to patch hail the *Teshik*. He didn't know if the sudden change in situation would spur Veers to talk to him and didn't want to waste time gambling. Grave was no fool; he'd just proven that. He was also, hopefully, not suicidal.

Not any more than Davek had been in coming to Yaga Minor, anyway.

When the admiral appeared he had the same glower. "How did you manage it, Fel? Did you have your aliens as backup this whole time?"

He decided to keep Grave confused and avoided the question. "The Chiss are here for Veers, Admiral. They've obtained proof that he engineered a false flag attack to drag them into the war against the raiders."

"Preposterous," Grave said at once. He really believed that.

"I'm sure they're willing to share their proof. The Chiss as thorough like that."

"You manipulated them into this somehow. Your family—"

"I'm offering you a *choice*, Admiral. You can surrender. Give Veers to the Chiss and end this. Or you can fight, and die, and waste *hundreds* of thousands of good soldiers. You decide."

Grave stared at him, stared hard, then shut off the link. Davek glanced at the colorful mess of the holo, then out the viewport. The battle still raged.

"Comm," he sighed, "Get the Chiss back online."

As the lieutenant was getting his aunt back online the tactical officer reported, "Sir, something's changed! *Invincible* is moving ahead, full thrusters!"

Davek glanced back at the holo. The hostile ships had ceased trying to hold Yaga Minor. They were all pushing away from the planet in a vast wave, with *Invincible* leading the charge.

He swung back to the comm console, where his aunt's image was waiting. "They won't surrender and they won't stand their ground. They're making a run for it. All of them."

"With your permission, Admiral Fel, we will engage."

"You've got it."

Wynssa nodded curtly and killed the link.

After that, all Davek could really do was watch.

He'd seen the Chiss fight at Sevok-358. They'd been a vengeful storm then, but now that they'd found the one who'd truly attacked them they were even fiercer. Their dark-hulled destroyers overtook Davek's ships, firing expertly as Veers' destroyers and Golan stations but avoiding ones aligned with Davek.

Some of Veers' ships surrendered, even as *Invincible* and the *Teshik* bravely kept pressing for the edge of Yaga Minor's gravity well. Davek ordered the *Thrawn* to move and intercept the *Invincible*, knowing his ship was still one of the most likely to stop Veers. The Chiss' attack ships swarmed like angry flitgnats all around Veers' ship and a half-dozen destroyers arrived to pound it. By the time the *Thrawn* joined the fight the super star destroyer's pale new hull was pockmarked with hundreds of black craters as its shields suffered cascade failure. Its guns fired madly, even destroying one Chiss ship outright.

And yet despite all that, Veers' ship was an unstoppable behemoth. The *Thrawn*'s shields withered under a sustained assault by thousands of concussion missiles. Soon its hull, too, was being torn apart. The Chiss didn't relent their attack and neither did Davek, even as alarms wailed and damage reports flooded in from all parts of the ship.

And then, suddenly, *Invincible* was gone, flung off into hyperspace and safety. As condition assessment bounced across the bridge Davek staggered over to Tactical, where the holo said more than words could. Over twenty ships from the Second Fleet had surrendered. Thirty more had been destroyed by the Chiss. A mere

eight star destroyers had escaped the Yaga System, including both the *Teshik* and *Invincible*.

The battle had been won. For all the losses the Fourth had taken they'd seized hold of Yaga Minor. Davek's forces now stood in possession of the Empire's Twin Pillars as well as its capital.

The battle had been won, but the war for the Empire's soul was far from over.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Eternity was an ocean, endlessly churning, endlessly sprawled in every direction. Jodram Tainer was flotsam in the ocean but he *was* the ocean. He knew every other speck of mind that had been absorbed into Abeloth's being over endless centuries. In a timeless instant he knew the minds of kings and queens, failed Jedi and vicious Sith, adepts of Force traditions he'd never heard of but suddenly understood, soldiers and politicians and rulers and humble peasants, life-forms of a thousand races from a thousand planets. He was them and they were him and they were all Abeloth.

But Abeloth was more than them. She absorbed their knowledge, their memory, their essence, but there was a hard core that remained unchanged by it all and bent the wills of all the assimilated souls. He understood that core as he understood all the other souls who'd become her. The horrible transformation that had birthed her had come from love. She'd wanted to be like the Father and Son and Daughter, to live like them and be with them forever. She'd wanted to be greater than she was. It was a selfish love but love all the same, and the core of Jodram that remained understood that love and resonated with it. Just as Abeloth- mortal Abeloth as she'd been untold eons ago- had adored the Father and Son and

Daughter she'd wanted to be as great and powerful as them, and even knowing she never could she'd striven on and on.

Jodram was not Abeloth. Jade was not the Father and the Skywalkers were not the Ones. Yet there was something he recognized in her longing. There was no sympathy; the core of a Jedi remained and he could never forgive her for the evil she'd selfishly wrought across so many eons. But there was pity for the horrible creature she'd become, desperate and needy and pitiable. There was, beneath pity, resonance.

Perhaps that was why he felt like he was floating near the surface of the ocean that was Abeloth, so close to where her waters met the world. Perhaps it was simple that she still wore body, so freshly consumed. Either way he could sense what was going on outside the ocean. He could see through her eyes that were his eyes, feel touch against the flesh that was his. When she'd reached out to stroke Jade's cheek, so fond, so familiar, he'd felt it all and raged.

It had done nothing. He was trapped beneath the ocean surface and could not break through. Abeloth told his flotsam-self what she'd whispered to him on the Celestial planet, a short time and forever ago: that he was weak, doomed by his very blood not just to remain in his wife's shadow but to be a lodestone dragging her down. That he would always fail the ones he'd loved.

He'd struggled, more angry than ever, but the riptide of souls had dragged him down, far from the surface, trapping him where he could see Jade and Terrid brought into view but not touch them, only rage and watch.

When Abeloth summoned, they came. Terrid didn't know what he expected to find on the bridge, but the sight still shocked him. When Abeloth and her fanatic Erath puppets had burst onto *Mon Melora* they'd slaughtered their way to the command centers, then locked down the rest of the crew and pumped the air from as many compartments as possible. It was quick and brutally efficient, not unlike what the Sith would have done.

Still, the Sith would have cleaned up their mess. When he and Jade stepped into the bridge their faces crinkled in disgust. Bodies

in blue Alliance uniforms- human, Mon Cal, a dozen other species- lay on the floor, so many hacked to pieces, surrounded by pools of drying blood. The remaining Erath, probably all that was left of Abeloth's death-cult, had taken the control stations and operations chairs across the bridge. He had no idea how they much they knew about operation a top-line Mon Cal warship, nor how they could ignore the hideous stench of so much death.

Abeloth stood at the center of it all. Starlight gleamed in Jodram Tainer's eyes and a smile, not yet unnaturally wide, showed lines of small sharp teeth.

"Welcome," she told them. "We've almost arrived."

"Where?" asked Jade. She still had the shackles on, just as Terrid still had both lightsabers. It occurred to him that a Jedi with her powers could have probably snapped those cuffs with her mind; she simply hadn't bothered, because she stood nothing to gain by it.

"You will see in just a moment," Abeloth said. She turned, backs to them and face to the great flashing viewport. She lifted her arms as if to embrace what lay ahead.

The ship shuddered violently as it was ripped from hyperspace by a gravity well. A planet surged dead ahead of them, half-eclipsing the stars. It glinted like a metal ball; patterns of light, infinitely complex, spread across its surface and grew especially bright on the half currently swallowed by night. Surrounding it, fainter but visible, were the lights and thrust-trails of hundreds, maybe thousands of ships moving in its orbit.

It was a planet Terrid had never seen with his own eyes, though he'd craved to since he'd heard of it as a child in Chiss space.

Coruscant, at last.

"I tried to take this world once, rule it," Abeloth said musingly. "That was a mistake."

"What are you going to do with it now?" Jade asked, voice trembling.

Jodram's head twisted back to see them, too far to be natural; that awful smile widened. "As I told you, I'm sending a message."

One of the Erath started talking frantically. Terrid peered out the forward view. As they barreled toward Coruscant as quickly as

they could several large ships were getting close enough to see in detail. He spotted more Mon Cal heavy cruisers, a few Alliance star destroyers.

The Erath chattered again. When he was done Abeloth spun to face her two captives. "They are hailing, ordering us to stop, even when we've broadcast our identification."

Jade had done something, but she didn't budge, didn't bat an eye. Abeloth stretched out a hand and a ghostly tentacle stretched out from Jodram's palm. Jade gave a cry as it wrapped around her neck, squeezed tight, choked her. Then, just as fast, it threw Jade face-first down to the deck. Her hands, still cuffed in front of her, softened her fall but Terrid heard her head crack hard on the deck.

"You want her intact, don't you?" Terrid snapped.

"Of course." That awful smile widened. "But she needed a lesson."

Terrid held from the urge to help her up. Jade pushed herself to her feet and lifted her arms up to wipe blood from the fresh and bleeding bruise on her forehead. She glanced sidelong at Terrid; she sent him nothing in the Force but her glare said it all. *You can stop this.*

No he couldn't. All he had were two sabers, nothing powerful enough to stop Abeloth from whatever course of destruction she'd set them on. When *Mon Melora* got close enough to the other Alliance ships its cannons opened fire as one. The Alliance ships fired back; explosions blossomed on raised shields and the entire deck shuddered so hard Terrid and Jade could barely stand.

The other ships did their best to block the charge but *Mon Melora* was one of the biggest, finest cruisers the Alliance had produced and it pushed hard and fast through their line. As Coruscant's gleaming metal marble swelled to fill the entire viewport Abeloth pivoted and snapped something in the Erath tongue. Her slaves hurried to comply. She glanced back at Terrid and Jade again, neck twisting too far, and said, "*This is my message.*"

She then stalked over to what must have been a comm station and said, loud and clear, "Greetings, people of Coruscant! I bring

you a gift. My name is Jodram Tainer, a knight of the Jedi Order, and I come to bring you vermin what you've long deserved!"

The Erath crewmen shut off the signal; Abeloth spun, full-body, to face the Jedi and the Sith. Terrid's hand went to his belt, to the lightsabers held there. Abeloth's went to the Mortis dagger, still mockingly tied to her waist.

"Why?" Jade's face contorted with anger. Abeloth wasn't just despoiling her husband's body; she was defiling everything he'd ever been. "Why are you doing this?"

"They rejected me once. They pay the price now. *You*, Jedi, pay the price. The people of the Alliance will never trust you after today."

Terrid watched as *Mon Melora* pushed through, past Coruscant's orbital defenses. A Golan station swung around to intercept them but the cruiser moved to evade. The cruisers and defense stations pounded their shields to a breaking point but all their laser canons and concussion missiles batteries turned their fire fully downward to fire onto the cityscape below.

Understanding made Terrid tremble. This was what he'd wanted, what he'd told Darth Avanc the One Sith should do. Abeloth was a weapon against the Jedi, he'd said, one who could do more damage than they ever could. She was doing that now. Every missile and laser strike in that crowded ecumenopolis below was taking thousands of lives. The people of the Alliance would never understand and never forgive. All the goodwill the Jedi had gathered from the galaxy over the past two generations was burning before their eyes, burning like the towers of Coruscant. *Mon Melora* plunged like a knife into the capital world's atmosphere and still kept falling.

"What are you doing?" Terrid snapped. "We're going to crash!"

Abeloth shrugged. "I'd hoped to leave Coruscant with this ship intact. But there are other ways."

"You'll kill us!" Jade said. The deck was shaking so hard she fell against Terrid and they clung to each other to keep upright.

With the flick of a hand, an invisible weight pushed Jade and Terrid both to their knees. The entire deck trembled; even the Erath

crewmen were shrieking in terror. The burning city rushed to meet them but Abeloth stepped slowly, purposefully across the bridge. She stopped right before Jade and Terrid, put one hand on the Mortis dagger, then crouched low.

Jodram Tainer's free hand reached out and grabbed Jade's chin in a tight grip. Abeloth tilted her head up, forced her to look into the grinning, monstrous face that had been her husband's.

"Don't worry," Abeloth said lovingly, "I'd never let my family be harmed."

Too late. They'd arrived too late.

Despite Allana's warning and the orbital defense Kyrr Esch had hastily thrown together, *Mon Melora* had cut a savage line through the Alliance ships that had come to block it, then continued onward, firing madly at Coruscant below. The Alliance defenders and the countless civilian ships still over Coruscant were in such disarray it took little effort for Allana's shuttle to weave its way close to the planet.

She strained over the pilot's shoulder to see for herself the horror she couldn't stop. The Alliance ships still attacking its rear had blown out most of *Mon Melora*'s engines but that did nothing to stop its plunge into the planet's gravity well, through its atmosphere, towards the surface that was already burning after heavy bombardment.

"Jade is on that ship," Allana whispered to the Master beside her. "I can feel it."

"And Abeloth?" asked K'Kruhk.

"I can feel immense power. *Awful* power. Can't you?"

Mournfully, the Whiphid nodded his shaggy head.

Allana had never felt so helpless in her life, not even as a child when she'd watch the man who claimed to be her father wreak havoc in her name. *Mon Melora* plunged toward the planet and shrunk so small it disappeared from view. Then the bright explosion of impact blossomed and burned in the atmosphere. Allana sucked in breath as she felt the loss of life, probably millions.

"I... don't understand," rasped the apprentice Jedi flying the shuttle. "Did Abeloth... destroy herself?"

"I can still feel her power below," said K'Kruhk. "Can't you?"

"I can," Allana said, and then she felt something else, something impossible and hopeful. "I feel Jade too."

"How can that be?" asked the Whiphid.

"I don't know." She reached out and squeezed the pilot's shoulder. "Take us down there. Please."

The apprentice- just a teenager, all they had left after sending all their knights and masters from Ossus- nodded unsteadily and sent their shuttle in a downward dive, toward the still-burning fires and black smoke that scarred the surface of the planet.

As they dropped into the atmosphere she saw it all. Coruscant was burning. Fires blazed high as mountains, casting pillars of great smoke into the sky. Ash choked the air, blown like curtains of gusts of hot wind. Great towers, miles high, slanted and fell, crashing, spreading more destruction. The world reeked of scorched death beyond measure.

It was all as her vision had shown her, and this time Allana had been unable to stop it.

In the awful seconds of *Mon Melora's* fall Jade had tried to call on the Force to stop its crashing, as she had with that hauler on Fengrine, but this ship was vastly larger and breaking apart around her. She'd tried, nonetheless, to concentrate, to fall into the Force and surrender to it and by surrendering make use of its mighty power, and just as she'd started to feel that strength she'd felt Abeloth's too. That timeless monster had used all her own power, greater than anything any Skywalker had ever known, to *throw* the warship into the city below.

And, just as its nose smashed into the fight mile-high tower, Abeloth withdrew all her power and used it for a single goal. As the ship and city exploded all around them she raised an invincible bubble around herself, Terrid, and Jade.

Then all Jade knew was fire and light. She squeezed her eyes shut and curled herself into a ball, face against knees, still-bound

hands over the back of her head; the best she could do. Everything shook around her so hard she lost consciousness.

When it came back- quicker than it had after the sun blast- she was no longer curled up. She was lying flat on a preserved slab of *Mon Melora's* bridge deck. Mountains of twisted debris rose on all sides around them; fire rose from the mountains and black smoke rose from the fire. Ash swirled on hot wind, stuck to her sweat-slick face, and caught her eyes.

She wiped them clear as best she could and spun around on unstable legs. She saw Wharn lying face-down five meters away. Equidistant from them both, the last point in the triangle, was Abeloth. Jodram's body stood upright, unharmed by the crash, unbothered by the blazing inferno. Those eyes took in the scene with dispassion: the fire, the smoke, the endless wreckage of a murdered city, the Sith lying half-conscious, barely preserved amidst it all.

Then Jodram's face turned to her and for a fleeting second she felt *him*. She felt his confusion, his pain, his all-consuming *need* to do something to save her.

Then Abeloth shoved his presence deep down and it was only her looking through Jodram's eyes.

Jade remembered what her grandfather had said about his love. He'd been able to reach into Abeloth, pull her out, save her from the eternal torture of being alive and helpless within that monstrous being. Something had weakened Abeloth's hold over all her constituent parts, probably the strain of protecting the three of them from the monstrous crash. Even now she was calling on the Force to push away the intense heat of the surrounding inferno that would have otherwise baked them all where they stood. She had power beyond any Jedi or Sith but she still had limits.

Abeloth was back in control now. She walked up to Terrid and, with the flick of a hand, picked him off his stomach and dropped him on his feet. The Chiss wavered but balanced; he looked around at the destruction and his face went slack in shock. She remembered what Wharn had said long ago, about how he longed

to see the spires and splendor of Coruscant. It was burning all around him now.

"The message is delivered," Abeloth said. "Now come. We will find a *new* ship and leave this place, together."

"We're not becoming your *family*," Jade said. She stepped carefully over the wreckage-strew slice of deck and reached out again for Jodram. She felt him, faintly, still inside Abeloth, still trying to push through to the surface of her weakened awareness.

Abeloth felt it too; she shoved him down again. Terrid straightened himself and stepped closer to her. "Where do you expect to go? How do we get away from all this?"

"I will take us out of the inferno," said Abeloth. "Step away from me and die by fire and smoke."

"We'll never go with you!" Jade shouted.

Jodram's head shook mournfully. "There's no other place for you, Skywalker."

"She's right, Jade," Terrid called.

"Wharn!" Surprised, the name escaped her lips.

"I am *not* Wharn." His features hardened and he stepped right beside Abeloth.

Exhausted as she was, Abeloth glowed with triumph. "He's right, Skywalker. Come with us and become more than what you are."

Terrid moved fast: one hand plucked his lightsaber from his belt, the other grabbed Jade's and tossed it in the air. He thumbed the trigger on his own weapon and the red blade shot out, straight into Abeloth's side. Jodram's face showed only mildly annoyance and she sidestepped away, not even slowed by the scalding wound that slanted through his ribcage and lungs. She drew the Mortis dagger and swung. It knocked Terrid's blade out of its path and out of his hand. The lightsaber went spinning away. Abeloth darted a step forward and cracked her elbow hard into Terrid's cheek, dropping him, then snapped a knee into his forehead.

By then Jade was inches away. Abeloth swung and caught her attack with the Mortis dagger; Jade's sizzling blade only sparked helplessly against the ancient, Force-empowered weapon. A punch

of Force energy took Jade in the stomach and threw her back. She just barely held on as she went skidding across the hot wreckage-strewn deck.

Terrid called his lightsaber to his hand; it flew through the air then turned, suddenly, and smacked into Abeloth's open palm. Jodram's palm. It squeezed to a fist; the lightsaber sparked and crumpled. Still using the Force to pin Jade to the deck she tossed its debris away and looked down at Terrid with casual contempt.

"You would be a fitting vessel for the dark side," Abeloth told him, "But a poor choice for a Son."

She stepped right over Terrid and pinned him to the ground with a boot to the chest. Then she raised the Mortis dagger to kill.

Yet the wound in her side- Jodram's side- burned. It drained Abeloths' power to keep the fatal damage to her Jodram's lungs and stomach away. It drained her further to keep Terrid and Jade pinned, and the keep the terrible fire and heat from the burning city at bay.

Even Abeloth's strength was not infinite. Jodram struggled to break to the surface, even now. Jade could feel him: the man she'd known and loved and trusted nearly all her life, the man who'd fathered her children, who'd been her friend and second half for over twenty years.

She closed her eyes. She forgot about the fire and death and reek of smoke, about the invisible hand pushing her down, even about Abeloth herself. All she thought about was Jodram and the love that bound them. With that love it was easy to surrender to the great power of the Force and by surrendering to gain its awesome strength.

Jodram could feel his wife reaching for him through eternity's waters, touching none of it until she touched him. She used every bit of strength she had, as a Jedi, as a Skywalker, as his wife, and used it to pull him forward, pull him *out*, pull him to the very surface of the ageless eternal aggregate being that was Abeloth. He felt himself pushed as well as pulled, urged on by the endless lives she'd consumed: all the Sith and all the Jedi, kings and queens and

apprentices and peasants. They acted as one with all their myriad selves that was one self, urging him to end their endless suffering.

And as he burst from her waters he knew it all: the heat of the fires that burned on all sides, the reek of scorched death, the tickle of drifting ash on his face and the way it choked his lungs.

Life, again.

He looked around with his own eyes and saw the world around him, not just the fire and horror and ruin but Darth Terrid- his friend Wharn- pinned beneath one foot, and Jade lying on her back meters away. She'd propped herself on her elbows to look at him but the rest of her concentration was still in the Force, pulling him outward, willing him to stay himself even as the desperate hard core of Abeloth's being did her best to pull him down. She was shocked that a mere mortal had been able to suppress her and raged to retake control. He realized, finally, the weapon he clasped in both hands. He felt its power and felt Abeloth's sublime terror as she knew he understood.

Terror only made her fight harder. Even Jade's strength couldn't last forever and he felt himself slipping back into the ocean to become one of the nameless helpless souls subject to Abeloth's will. The sensation of ash and heat against his skin dulled; so did the firmness of the dagger in his hands. In seconds she would take him again and finished what she'd begun.

Abeloth had told him he could never save the ones he loved. She was wrong about that.

With both hands he lowered the Mortis dagger until it was level with his chest, then reversed the grip. He plunged it into the softness of his stomach and eternity was over.

Terrid felt Abeloth die. The instant the blade pierced flesh it was like an exhalation, far greater than when he'd witnessed the death of Abeloth's other body on the Erath flagship. For a second the entire universe seemed to cry out in agony; then one death was replaced by the exultant scream of a million souls freed from imprisonment. And then, finally, there was nothing but one man.

Terrid knew that Jade had pulled Jodram's awareness to the surface, allowing him to regain control over his own body for a few fleeting seconds. She's seen the twinkle of starlight dwindle from his eyes, replaced by the soul of the man he'd called friend all those years ago.

In coming to himself Jodram had understood everything in one second, and made the only choice he could. The Mortis dagger slipped right below his sternum and all the way through. Its bloody metal point jutted out from Jodram's lower back. The Jedi stepped off Terrid's chest, stumbled, and fell.

Jodram was still alive, barely. His wounds would kill him in minutes but Abeloth was gone from his body. He was himself again. Jade knew it and scrambled across the wreckage and half-fell over her husband. Soot-stained hair spread over his bloody chest and she clasped one hand tight.

Terrid staggered to his feet. Without Abeloth's immense strength the heat from the fires around them was starting to rise. In minutes they'd be scalded. He spun around frantically, looking for some escape, knowing none would come. They would die here in agony but at least they'd killed Abeloth forever; that was something. It had to be.

Then a ship dropped down from above. Terrid felt a gust of air push the encroaching heat away: a gust not only from the ship's downward repulsors but from the Force. The ship sat ten meters over the battlefield but two bodies dropped from it anyway, trailing brown robes as they fell. They landed, Force-assisted and feet-first, on the ground behind Jade. One was a massive Whiphid, tusked and long-furred. The other was a human woman on the far side of middle age, fresh streaks of grey running through red hair that furled in the wind: Allana Solo Djo.

Two new lightsabers sprung to life. Allana dashed for Jade and Jodram. The mighty Whiphid advanced toward Terrid. The Chiss has no weapons to fight with, no strength- physically or in the Force- to match the power emanating from his opponent.

Then a second ship burst into view, coming not over the wall of flames but *through* it. The sleek black flying wing spun a tight circle

around the debris field and slowed to a near-halt. Terrid watched, amazed, as its ventral hatch swung open. As it turned its dorsal side toward Jade and Allana a body half-fell out of it, grasping to the support strut with one hand and reaching out with the other. Even from a distance, Terrid recognized Serissa Lohr.

His eyes darted below the edge of the hovering *Intruder*. He saw Jade lift her head off Jodram's chest. Blood stained her cheek and hair but she looked straight at Terrid through a curtain of rising ash.

Stay with us, she said, loud and clear.

Stay with the Jedi, to be captured, interrogated, imprisoned perhaps, to be with Jade again and awkwardly rehabilitated by beings who wanted to erase everything he'd become in the past seventeen years.

That was the choice: the one and only choice he'd faced again and again throughout his life. Throw away what he'd become or use what had happened to him- good and bad- to become a better, strong version of what he'd been before.

As there had only ever been one choice, there'd only ever be one answer.

Darth Terrid sprinted for *Intruder*, using the Force to lengthen his strides. The Whiphid was fast behind him but whoever piloted the Sith ship nudged closer. Terrid threw himself up with one last leap. Both hands stretched out and Serissa grabbed him and pulled him through the hatch.

The ship climbed steeply the moment they tumbled inside. Hot air screamed through the porthole until Terrid used the Force to pull it shut. Inertia still pinned him against Serissa and the back wall but they disentangled themselves from each other.

"A *thank you*," Serissa said, "Would be appreciated."

"Thank you," Terrid panted. "How did you *find* me?"

"How could we *not*?" the Hapan woman said. "What about Abeloth? Is she dead?"

He nodded. "Skywalker did it. And her husband."

"Are *they* dead?"

"He is. She isn't."

"Pity," she sniffed.

"Who's flying this ship?"

"Who do you think?" Serissa started crawling for the exit portal. Terrid followed, and one after another they pulled themselves into the cockpit. Terrid looked over Darth Kheykid's broad shoulders to see the chaotic space over Coruscant, where civilian, military, and rescue ships all swarmed about, none knowing what had happened or what they could do to alleviate the disaster on the planet below. *Intruder* slipped effortlessly and unnoticed through the fray.

Terrid clasped the back of Kheykid's seat and asked, "How did you escape the planet?"

"Simple," the Barabel hissed. "I called your apprentice to rescue me."

He looked at Serissa, unable to hide his shock. The Hapan said, "What did you expect? I *am* Sith, am I not?"

"I believe she is now," Kheykid said.

Terrid nodded. She was Sith. He was Sith, still. What kind of Sith she'd become, what kind of Sith he was now- those were questions.

When they cleared the orbital chaos and Coruscant's gravity well Kheykid brought on the hyperdrives. Light enveloped them and flung them forward, toward whatever answers awaited.

The sight of the Sith craft escaping the sky grabbed Jade's attention, but only she felt the body beneath hers retched. Then she pressed her forehead against Jodram's again and cared about nothing but her husband.

She felt his life flowing out from him like the blood that pooled around him. He had just enough strength left to grasp her hand with his, and she felt his grip weakening. Metal blade and lightsaber had torn through lung, stealing his breath and speech, but his bloodied chest heaved beneath hers as it struggled to take in air.

She moved her other hand over the wound and said *Enough*.

He said, *All right*.

She shifted her face to kiss him once. Smoke, ash, salt from blood and tears. The trembling stopped and so did his struggling.

She tried to fill his last moments with everything they'd had between them: years of apprenticeship, always beside each other; years on Fengrine, building unity and justice and a family; the love that wouldn't pass away but live on through Nat and Kol whatever sons and daughters they bore in turn. He felt that, understood that, and was filled with something she'd rarely felt from him but was so deserved: pride.

Gently, the last of him faded into the Force and was gone.

She picked her head up and realized Allana was crouched beside her, hand on her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," her cousin whispered.

And through her grief pieced came into place. Her vision of the Throne of Balance, where she and Jodram had protected Allana together, his disappeared the moment Abeloth took possession of his body. In that moment everything had changed. Whether Abeloth's final death had changed things back she didn't know, couldn't know right now, and she held back her desire to tell her cousin all these things. They would wait for another time.

Another figure stepped into view: a hulking old Whiphid, robes and gray fur tussled by the wind. He called, "We must hurry to the ship, please."

"I know," said Jade. "But the Mortis dagger- Where is it?"

They looked around and spotted it laying in front of Jodram's feet. The long metal blade looked different from before. Its hard edges were crumbling, its metal gleam gone. As Jade and Allana crawled over to it they say that the weapon was already breaking apart on its own. It cracked into smaller pieces before their eyes.

It was a weapon that had been made eons ago, perhaps by the Celestials themselves, and imbued with a Force power greater than any Jedi could understand. Whatever purpose it had been made for- to control Abeloth and the Ones, perhaps- it seemed to know when its job was done.

They watched as eternity dissolved into dust and disappeared with the wind. Then K'Kruhk said, "I cannot hold back the heat much longer."

"It's all right." Jade placed a hand on Jodram's face. It felt smooth and looked serene. "Just help me carry him up."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The Second Fleet's flight from Yaga Minor had been so fast and so chaotic that, once Veers and Grave were gone, there were still hundreds of thousands of Imperial soldiers within the shipyards with no clear loyalties, most of them totally confused as to the events of the past few days. Adding to that uncertainty were the millions more Yagai insurrectionists who'd thrown their lot in with the forces of Davek Fel (it was too hard to think of him as admiral or emperor). Somehow, all those beings would have to be accounted for, evaluated, and placed into order to get the might Yaga Minor 'Yards running on war footing.

It was to Lukas Briggs' consternation that- as deputy chief quartermaster at Bilbringi- he knew more than a few things about organization and operations in a shipyard. That he'd already proven where his loyalties lay made things worse. That Davek Fel had invited him aboard the briefing room on the *Thrawn* for a one-on-one conversation was the clincher. An offer delivered like that was impossible to say no to.

His wife clearly didn't see it that way, but for the sake of the children, Marian kept her composure.

"They're giving all of Yaga Minor to *you*?" she said after Lukas explained the situation. She, Leena, and Polaw were crowded tight to fit into the hologram's transmission field.

"They need someone to put the pieces back together and run the place," Lukas said. "The *Empire* needs someone. Now more than ever."

Marian took a deep breath, in and out. "There's a lot of rumors flying around, Lukas. It's hard to tell what's going on."

"Dad, did you really fight for the aliens?" asked Leena.

"You mean the Yagai? Well... I guess so. Fel wants the natives to have chief administrative control over the shipyards.... Which might take some weight off my back, actually."

"You talked to him about this?" Marian asked.

"Personally," Lukas nodded.

She thought about that. He noticed her pull the kids in even closer. "This Fel... How do you feel about him?"

She didn't call him 'emperor.' Hardly anybody did right now, Lukas included. 'Fel' was the only thing close to comfortable.

"He pulled us Voidwalkers through a hard situation once. And from what I've seen of how Veers does thing I don't like it."

"Dad," asked Polaw, "Is it *safe* where you are?"

It was difficult to explain things you hardly understood yourself. For his kids' sake he had to fake it. "We'll be fine here, but right now you need to stay at Bilbringi."

"When are we going to be together then?"

He caught Marian raise an eyebrow. Lukas told them, "I don't know. Once I get things organized here, I'll try to make space for you three. Until then I'll try to comm as much as I can. Keep doings things at Bilbringi like you normally would, understand?"

The kids nodded but Marian's face was full of doubt. There was no such thing as normal anymore and nobody had any idea what the new abnormal was going to look like. All sorts of contradictory reports had been coming in over the past few days about Veers' disposition and location but nothing was verified. Nothing was certain. Nothing was safe.

But for his kids, he faked the brave smile. They, at least, seemed consoled by it. When the connection ended Lukas slumped in the chair behind his newly-appointed desk, exhausted just from a short conversation.

He didn't get much of a breather. After just a few minutes his personal comm station started beeping. Some fresh crisis to be addressed, he was sure. He tapped it on and heard the view of his newly-appointed Yaga aide buzz, "Sir, are you getting the broadcast?"

Lukas sat stiff in his chair. "*What* broadcast?"

"It's coming across the HoloNet on all frequencies. We're trying to block it but the encryption pattern keeps changing and—"

"Patch it into my office."

"Yes, sir."

The aide's voice clicked off, and mere seconds later the holo-projector sprung to life. Lukas saw what he'd expected and dreaded to see: Corrien Veers, standing atop a podium with a line of stormtroopers behind his back. More stunningly, instead of putting a big Imperial crest on the wall behind him he'd raised a massive head-shot of Palpatine himself. The long-dead Emperor stared at the Empire-wide audience as Veers went on with his speech.

"We will not surrender, and we will not go quietly." He pounded the podium with a fist. "We will fight today. We will fight tomorrow. We will never stop fighting until we have restored the Empire to its *true* state and remove the pretend-emperor who seeks to tear down the legacy of our great founder.

"I know I am not alone. Even now, brave Moff Thane of Entralla and the worlds of the Velcar Sector have pledged their resources to fighting the usurper and his Jedi masters. Ships from the First and Third fleet flock to us. Even now I speak to you from the deck of the greatest warship in the galaxy.

"This ship, christened with the blood of patriots murdered by vicious alien traitors, was called *Invincible*. It has been christened once again with the lives of hundreds of thousands of good soldiers fighting against Jedi cultists, deceitful aliens, and their puppet

emperor. I now grant it the name *Nemesis*, and I promise that it will be that to all who've tried to destroy our founder's legacy."

Veers thumped a fist against his chest and shouted, "We will fight today! We will fight tomorrow! We will never stop until the Empire has been restored to what it was! I, Corrien Veers, promise this on my life's blood!"

An unseen audience broke into applause but Veers gave it no notice. Fist still pressed over his heart he lifted his head and stared forward with utmost dignity.

Then, finally, the transmission winked out.

There were no new revelations from Veers' broadcasts. What little specifics he'd given had, more or less, jarred with the scattered intel reports Davek's people had been gathering since Yaga Minor, though as expected Veers had twisted some facts to his purpose. While the Third Fleet's Admiral Mearv had, after much delay, pledged his allegiance to Bastion and Emperor Fel, a number of his captains had abandoned their posts and run to the Velcar sector, where Moff Thane was giving Veers and Grave shelter. The sheer number of defections made Mearv's intentions and authority suspect; likewise, while all of the other members of the Moff Council had pledged allegiance to Davek it was also guaranteed some of them were in communication with Thane and Veers. Rooting out the disloyal from the loyal was going to be a long, arduous process.

Yet it was what Davek had set himself upon.

He was forced to consider the ugly realities of that process as he sat in the executive conference room aboard the *Thrawn*. It felt like he'd been holding meetings there, large and small, since the Battle of Yaga Minor's sudden conclusion. At the risk of leaving Bastion undefended he'd moved himself and the First's flagship there, while leaving Devlin Jaeger and the *Makati*, damaged as it had been during the fight, to guard Yaga Minor.

There were only two other people in the oversized conference room with him as he reviewed the list of capital ship commanders who'd surrendered or been captured alive during the fight at Yaga

Minor. Marasiah had already reviewed the list; so had Captain Korak. Without either of them having had to say it, Davek knew that one name had drawn both their attention. It drew his also.

"It's a complicated situation, sir," Korak was saying. He slumped in his chair and hugged his arms across his torso. "You might want to form a tribunal to make case-by-case judgments."

He'd already decided against that. "We send to make a clear decision about what happens with soldiers who side with Veers and Grave. We need to send a message so everyone who *does* align with them knows what he or she is getting into. The punishment they're risking."

"What do you plan to do with the enlisted men and low-ranking officers?" asked Marasiah. She, too, was hesitant to get to the hard choices.

"Most of them didn't even know what was going on at Bastion and Yaga Minor. We need to show we can be merciful. I'll offer amnesty to those willing to accept it."

"Might get some traitors trying to slip back into the ranks and cause damage," remarked Korak.

"I know. That's why we'll have to screen people carefully, and monitor them once they've been assimilated back into our armed forces."

"That will take a lot of manpower," said Marasiah.

"We'll do what we have to," Davek grunted. "We'll be sending a message there too. That we're benevolent and forgiving. But only to a point."

"The captains, then," said Korak.

Davek looked down at the list of captains. As most of the ships they'd faced at Yaga Minor had been Second Fleet, very few of the names were familiar to him. It made that of his former first officer stand out all the more.

"Some of the captains there surrendered as soon as the Chiss showed up," said Korak. "Is there any chance of amnesty for them?"

Davek shook his head firmly. "They ordered their people to fire on the rightful leader of the Empire. No. Captains and senior officers have to be punished."

"How?"

Davek drummed his fingers on the tabletop, anxious. "Most of them should be placed in prison. No trial, no tribunal. They committed treason and will be treated like traitors."

"All of them?"

There was no getting around it now. He looked down at the name. "Some exceptional cases require more severe consequences. Vice Admiral Renwar wasn't just following orders from her superior. She fired on her commanding officer."

"Then what will you *do*?" asked Korak.

Davek's eyes darted to Marasiah; her lips were a tight-pressed pale line. If he had the damned Force he might be able to get something from her, but right now she wasn't offering a thing.

"Military law is quite clear on the matter," he told Korak. "The punishment is execution."

Korak sucked in breath but considered his words before saying, "That will send a message, won't it?"

"Yes. It will." It said that no one fired on the emperor without paying the highest penalty, even if she'd once been his trusted officer. With the Empire on the verge of breaking apart there could be no room for sentiment or softness. No room for excess mercy going ahead.

"What about *other* captains we capture going ahead?" asked Korak. "What will happen to them?"

"They know who their rightful emperor is. They won't be able to use the just-following-orders excuse."

"They'll fight harder if it's victory-or-death."

"If they're smart they won't fight at all and leave Veers right away. I'm forcing them to make a choice. Loyalty or treason, as simple as that."

Korak nodded grimly. He was formulating another question when Davek's comlink buzzed. He brought it to his lips and said, "This is Emperor Fel." It sounded surreal on his lips.

"The Chiss party had just arrived, sir," his aide said. "Should I send them to your conference room?"

"Please do." Davek flicked off the comm. He told Korak, "I'm sorry, Captain, it looks like I have other business."

Before, as admiral to captain, he'd been *Benyon*. A first name, intimate, befitting all they'd gone through as Voidwalkers. Now, as emperor to subject, it was all titles. Sensing that, Korak rose, tucked his datapad under one arm, and raised the other to salute.

"Dismissed," Davek said, and the younger man hurried out of the conference room, leaving Davek alone with his wife at last. He swung his head to face her and said, "Your opinion?"

"I think you made the right choice," she said, still cool.

"I'm glad you approve." He was, but he knew he didn't sound it. For a long time he'd relied on Renwar, trusted her, considered her a friend. He knew Marasiah, too, had a friend who'd been loyal to Veers. If he was still alive, if he were ever captured, his fate would be the same.

It was just one hard choice awaiting him if he was to hold the Empire together. There were more to come and if he couldn't accept this burden he could never shoulder what was to come.

But he would have to shoulder it. For the sake of the trillions of sentient beings in the Empire who deserved better than what Veers would make. For the sake of his father.

"I appreciate you not questioning my judgment in front of him," Davek said, "But I need your advice, Marasiah. Now more than ever."

"I told you I agree."

"We need to be united. We need to be *seen* as united. Because you were right, this is all about symbols. You're already a symbol for the Jedi in the eyes of most of our citizens. You need to be that, now more than ever."

"You're serious about shutting off ties with Ossus."

"I need the Imperial knights to be separate from the Jedi. And if they're separate they need their own leader."

She nodded, still guarded, unsurprised. They'd talked little of Arlen or Jaina since Davek made his declaration. He hadn't talked to his brother or mother either; he'd been grateful to have too much else to do.

When the door to the conference room slid open next he jerked to his feet in surprise. His aunt Wyn was there in her black Chiss admiral's uniform, as expected. So was his adopted cousin Kanarn, also in black. Behind them, in his pale antique tunic but no brown robes, was Arlen.

Davek's eyes locked on his brother's. He swallowed hard and said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting you."

"It's okay." Arlen shrugged. "I've actually been with Aunt Wyn since we delivered the package from Balmorra."

"What about your daughter?"

"Back on *Champion*, with Tamar."

"Arlen..."

"I know. I'm a disloyal Jedi liable to be convicted for crimes against the Empire." He smiled sourly and spread his hands. "I won't be here long. I was going to start for off Ossus pretty soon. I wanted to see if you'd come with."

Roan and Vitor were still there. He wanted his sons back at Bastion, at the newly-repaired Jedi academy with Marasiah, but he'd put off retrieving them, again with the excuse that there was so much else to do. He was honest with himself; he was afraid of seeing his mother. Even if Jaina understood what he'd done was necessary she'd never approve.

But as Emperor he had to shoulder his burdens and face his fears, one after another. "I appreciate that, Arlen. Thank you. I'll make arrangements."

That surprised his brother, but Arlen nodded. There was so unsaid and so much understood. Davek turned his attention to his aunt and cousin. "Thank you again for the help you provided. There was no way we could have turned the battle at Yaga Minor without your arrival."

"The Chiss Ascendancy formally extends gratitude to you and your brother for revealing Veers' deception," Wyn said.

"What does that mean going ahead?" broached Marasiah, still seated at the table. "Veers is still out there. You haven't punished him yet."

"We're very aware. The Ascendancy has approved the creation of a detached special task force that will help your fleets track down and destroy Veers."

"Will you be leading?" Davek raised a brow.

"For now. I can't give details right now. There are many in the Ascendancy wary of prolonged involvement in someone else's civil war."

Davek couldn't blame them. From all reports Veers had all the Velcar sector and most of the Corrien sector declaring loyalty to him. As reports of defections from the Third Fleet came trickling in it became clear he had the means to defend them as well. The war against Veers might drag on for years; the war for the hearts and minds of the average Imperial citizen might drag on for even longer. He knew there were still many beings who, too reasonably, saw Davek's actions as a dangerous misstep, if not an act of treason against a legal ruler.

"I'm thankful for your help," he told his aunt, "But the unpleasant reality is that many of our citizens won't see a problem with Veers dragging the Chiss into our war. If we have proof he had Avaris killed, that's something different."

"The Imperial agent was captured was surprisingly forthcoming," said Wyn. "He explained in detail how he and the Mandalorians staged the false-flag on Cam'co station. He says he *believes* Veers was also behind Avaris' assassination but he had no specific proof. He only believes because a *Sith* told him so."

The reproach in her voice was clear enough. Davek believed, firmly, that Veers and Retor of Kuhvult had arranged Avaris' death to pave the way for Veers' ascension but he still had no proof.

"Please, give a copy of what the agent gave you," Davek told Wyn. "From there... we'll compile sufficient evidence to convince people Veers killed Avaris."

"*Compile?*" Arlen's face screwed tight. "You mean *fake*?"

"We will convince our people of what we already know and in doing so break Veers' claim as rightful ruler," Davek said sternly. "I'm trying to end a civil war as soon as I can, using any method I can."

"Yeah. I figured that already."

The brothers held hostile gazes; then Marasiah said, "When we go to Ossus, we'll be taking our own ship. So we can bring Vitor and Roan back with us."

"Of course" Arlen's eyes flicked away from Davek's. "I was expecting that. When will you be coming?"

"Soon," Davek said. "Very soon. Don't worry."

Arlen grunted, faint approval. Davek looked at the mirror-smooth tabletop. It would be hard meeting his mother but it had to happen. And once it was done he could take Marasiah and his sons back to Bastion and, mind a little freer of anxiety, set himself to finishing what his father started.

He hoped.

She forced him to his knees without a gesture, without a warning. Pain shot through his legs as they slammed on the hard black stone of the chamber but he took it in, accepted it. As a Sith, Darth Kroan could do that much at least. He lifted his head to stare up at Darth Wyyrlok. Her eyes were hard and her face betrayed at little as her Force aura. All he could feel was the raw power of Darth Krayt flowing through her, waiting to be used, like a stormcloud about to burst.

She was shaming him; he understood that. As Retor of Kuhvult he'd never knelt, never bowed, not to anyone. As Darth Kroan he'd only genuflected once, when he'd been brought in the presence of Lord Krayt as he dreamed. Even then, deep down, the act had offended the pride that had been bred into him as heir to a centuries-old Kuati house.

When it became clear she was waiting for him to speak from this posture of obedience, Darth Kroan said, "I did all I could to come to you, Lord Wyyrlok. I swear I'll do anything to atone for my failure."

He tried to make his shame and regret clear in the Force. They were authentic as could be; Arlen Fel and his pet Mandalorian had beaten him again, far worse than before. He bore the mark of failure on his face: mottled patches of burnt flesh, scars from his own Force

lightning, crept up from his right cheek, past his eye, and across his bare scalp. Gone were the holo-star good looks he'd used to charm the upper echelons of the galaxy's business class. On his flight back to Shedu Maad he'd heard all the reports on the news-nets of his supposed murder by the Jedi. It had briefly eclipsed reports from Imperial Space before the calamity on Coruscant eclipsed them both. It was humiliating beyond words to see a lifetime of work turned to ash but he still retained his drive, his anger. Wyyrlok would see that. Through her, *Krayt* would feel it. They would let him do the work that was needed.

He believed that. He'd clung to that belief on his flight back to the One Sith's hidden base, but now that he stared at her cold and powerful eyes he finally started to doubt.

She asked, "What do you think you can do for us, Lord Kroan?"

"Vengeance," he said. The word came out without his willing, as though she- and *Krayt*- were drawing it from his mind.

"How? You can never be Retor for us again."

"I was never Retor. Even when I only had his name, I was Kroan waiting to be born."

He believed that with all his soul. She could tell that, surely, but still she looked down on him with cold discerning eyes.

"Ever before we found you, you were prideful."

"Pride is no sin for one of our kind."

"No. But you were also vain." She bent low and reached out. A hand marked with red and black tattoos gently ran down the scars of his face.

"I won't repair them," he said. "I'll keep them, to remind me of what I've lost."

"To fuel your vengeance."

"Exactly. Allow me to stay on Shedu Maad and grow stronger. I will not fail you again."

"Is this your promise to Lord *Krayt*?"

"It is my promise."

She drew her hand back a little but the tips of her fingers still lightly stroked the scar tissue. "You should know that things will be changing from now on."

"Change how?" He had no idea what she meant.

"Our hold on the Hapan Consortium is about to become much more... absolute. It may draw the attention of the Jedi."

"The perfect opportunity for revenge."

"And *obedience*." She stabbed her fingernails, splitting skin and drawing blood.

"I live to serve Lord Krayt." His lip curled, bearing teeth.

"Remember that well, Darth Kroan. And surrender your vanity."

"I will. You can be sure of it."

"I already am," Darth Wyyrlok said, and she pressed her whole palm around Kroan's skull. Force lightning burst from her hand before he could raise his defenses; pain exploded in his mind, freezing his limbs, cutting him off from the Force. In his agony he could feel her direct the destructive energies to dance across his skin, burning his face, making the scars left from Balmorra small hints of his new disfigurement.

And even in his agony Darth Kroan understood. This was the purging of his vanity, the punishment for his failures, the mark that he was now and forever hers to command.

In the weeks since her granddaughter's death, the pain of loss had gradually receded. Demia Lohr forced herself to go about the business of directing the Hapes Consortium as she had for thirty years. She'd resumed the normal duties of listening to the fawning of the Duchas and punishing those who stepped too far in their corruption. She listened to Lenor Chalk's briefing every morning as she stood on her private balcony, looking out at the ocean. Somewhere in those waters, what was left of Serissa drifted. She knew that the girl had brought her fate on herself just as her mother before her. Demia did not regret the act, only its necessity.

Yet despite it all, she was tried. The work of ruling no longer brought satisfaction.

There was some solace to be had. For thirty years she'd led the Consortium to a path of total isolation from galactic affairs and felt more glad of it now than ever. The Consortium was hermetic but

not blind; its listening posts picked up all the gruesome details of the raider attacks on Imperial space, the murder of its leaders, and the ferocious civil war in which the Jedi, predictably, were in the middle. Then had come the news of the disaster on Coruscant. She still wasn't clear on the facts, only that one of the Alliance's greatest warships had fired on the ecumenopolis before crashing into the planet, killing millions. Rumor placed the Jedi in the middle of that too. Some even said they'd caused it.

All in all, her choice of isolation for Hapes had never looked better.

One strangeness lingered in her mind. Since the death of her granddaughter the Sith had not spoken with her at all. They'd not contacted her and she'd not contacted them. She'd gone longer stretches without dealing with them but it seemed odd, given how active their Jedi rivals were across the galaxy of late. She'd kept on expecting Darth Avanc or his Chiss disciple to appear and ask for her assistance in their struggle with the other cultists, but they simply never materialized.

She knew she'd never be released from her bonds to the Sith easily. Their absence was therefore becoming suspicious.

With the Sith, all she could do was wait. As for the rest, news came in steadily. Two days after word first broke of the Coruscant disaster she woke early and found herself eager for Lenor's briefing. She looked forward to news of punishment the Jedi so rightly deserved for their ceaseless meddling. Demia therefore threw a loose shimmersilk robe over her nightgown and went onto the balcony to watch the early-morning light play across the waters. She smelled the salt spray, listened to the weeping of seabirds, and found herself feeling more at peace than she had in months.

She stayed like that for a while, until she heard the sound of the door behind her hissing open. "You're early," she said as she turned, then froze.

Her granddaughter stood two meters away from her. She wore a loose cloak, simple and plain, that hid her figure and matched her black hair. Serissa simply stared at her, dark eyes narrowed, as though she were deep in thought.

Demia's heart raced at the sight; then her pulse subsided. She understood- instinctively, somehow- that all this was still a dream. A vivid dream, amazingly so, but still a fantasy. She'd not dreamed of Serissa after the girl's death, not like she'd dreamed of Melor, but it had to happen sooner or later. Her granddaughter took two long steps toward her but stopped short of touching. Her lips pursed; her jaw worked to form words but nothing came out.

Demia spoke instead. "It's all right, Serissa. I understand. I forgive you."

The words made Serissa's eyes harden. Her expressionless face became a sneer and she said, "I do *not* forgive you."

Suddenly Demia felt pressure on her throat, as though invisible hands had grasped it. Her fingers went for it but all they found was an old woman's sagging skin. The pressure tightened and tightened; her windpipe felt on verge of cracking and she realized this wasn't a dream, not even a nightmare.

As she gasped for air that wouldn't come her vision started to blur. Blackness crept around the edges of her sight and the only part of the world to remain in focus was her granddaughter's eyes. They were narrowed in hatred and somehow, impossibly, their dark irises seemed to tint red-gold.

The old woman's throat finally snapped with an audible crunch. As the certainty of death took Demia Lohr her eyes bulged; her mouth hung open and her dry tongue rolled pathetically out. As the last breath left her lungs the old queen released her death rattle and her arms fell limp at her sides. Serissa released her and let her collapse on the balcony in a puddle of her own robes.

Serissa stood there, looking down at the body of her grandmother. Her mind was blank, all the anger of spite of a second ago drained. She's murdered before but this was different. She was stunned at what she'd done.

Gently, Darth Terrid dropped from the palace roof and planted his boots beside Serissa's. When she didn't react to his presence he asked, "Isn't this what you wanted from the beginning?"

His voice made her shudder. Serissa composed herself, swallowed, and turned to face him. "I did. I just never imagined it happening this way."

Terrid understood. She was less stunned by what she had done than *how* she'd done it. Serissa's natural instincts- her pride, her ambition, her long-smoldering spite- impelled her to the dark side, but she still had little control over her powers. She merely let her instincts surge through her and used what they provided with little conscious thought.

"You are now queen," Terrid said, "But you are a long way from being a Sith Lord."

"I know. I'm ready to learn."

"And your aims for the Hapes Consortium?"

"I'm ready to remake it."

"Those are two great tasks. Are you sure you're ready to undertake them at once?"

She scowled. "If you didn't think I was you wouldn't have let me kill her. I will become queen *and* Sith, at the same time. They're not two tasks, they're one in the same."

Darth Wyyrlok, he thought, would be very pleased to hear that. "Your training should be quite... unique."

"Will you be doing it? Are you still my Master?"

"Do you still want to be my apprentice?"

Surprise flicked over her face for a second; she wasn't expecting to be given a choice. "Yes."

"Why?"

Hesitation, again for but a second. "You've changed since we came back."

"How?" He'd felt it, known it, but never quite found the words to explain it to himself.

She looked at him and considered. "You seem as though you've broken whatever chains held you to the person you once were. You seem *more* a Sith than before. That's why I want you to train me. I want to leave what I was behind."

"And become what?"

She lifted her head proudly. "A better, stronger version of what I was."

Terrid couldn't restrain a smile. That was the core of this girl that had reminded him so much of himself from the beginning. She was right: after the hunt for Abeloth and its climax amidst the burning ruins of Coruscant, he felt that something in him had been forged anew. The weak but driven Jedi apprentice of twenty years ago was long gone, but so was the uncertain Sith who cowered before the power of Darth Avanc.

He was a new Sith, his own Sith, and no matter how hard Darth Wyyrlok and Krayt's other acolytes tried to bend Serissa to their will, Terrid knew that she, too, would never be fully tamed.

"I believe there is much I can teach you. And much we do for each other," he said, and to his satisfaction, Serissa smiled back.

CHAPTER FORTY

The late afternoon sun dyed the arid landscape red-gold and slanted warm light through the tall narrow windows of the Jedi Temple on Ossus. As she walked down the corridor Allana stepped into gilded light, back to shadow, through light and shadow again. Tanith Zel walked alongside her; the younger woman had just returned from an intelligence-gathering mission on the edge of Hapan space and had come back with yet another revelation to rock Allana's world.

"None of our spies know anything about where Serissa was this whole time," Tanith was saying. "She didn't say anything in her coronation speech either, only that she would avenge the people who killed her grandmother."

"Is there any doubt she killed Demia?"

"There's no proof either way. Someone else could have killed Demia and set Serissa up as a puppet."

"Is that likely? What do we really know about Serissa?"

"Not enough."

Allana sighed. Even by the standards of treacherous Hapan court politics it was incredible that a queen might be killed and replaced by her own granddaughter. Serissa was still a teenager, which made it possible she was a pawn of someone else, perhaps the

Sith, but Allana was skeptical. Allana herself had been a seventeen-year-old Hapan princess once, and at that age she'd been nobody's naive pawn. She doubted Serissa was either.

"What kind of ceremony did they give Demia?" she asked Tanith.

"A grand one. Thousands of mourners got to see her lie in state."

"Including your spies? What did they make of the body?"

Tanith shook her head. "The official cause was poisoning. There didn't seem to be physical damage but that sort of things is easy to cover up."

Allana hummed neutrally. It had taken a lot of Jedi equanimity not to hate Demia Lohr these past thirty years. Tanith, who'd lost both parents in the Hapan secession, had never hesitated to loathe the usurper queen. Most of the men and women on New Hapes would be celebrating the news. For Allana, it only brought grim uncertainty.

There was more than enough of that already. The events on Coruscant had cast the Alliance into chaos, and the Jedi were at the heart of it. Kyrr Esch was so busy fighting off no-confidence votes in the Senate that he hadn't been able to speak to Allana in days. Grand Master Lowbacca was on his way back to the Unknown Regions to try and sort all this out, but Allana didn't know how much he could do. The millions of Alliance citizens who'd lost loved ones on Coruscant would never understand what Abeloth was or how the Jedi had stopped her. They'd only understand that broadcast, made with poor Jodram's face, and blame the Jedi for their suffering. It was that monster's last, worst revenge.

Allana let Tanith go and rounded a corner into one of the garden atria built into the sloping side of the Temple pyramid. The transparisteel windows looked out on the setting sun and the harsh desert landscape, and the red light washed away all the varied colors of the plants and flowers artfully arrayed along winding, meditative paths.

Allana only had to reach out slightly in the Force to find the proper way. At the center of the garden a stream trickled into a

shallow pool rimmed by rocks. Jade was there, draped in brown robes and seated cross-legged on one stone jutting out toward the center of the pool. Through the Force she exuded the same quiet, peaceful sadness that had enveloped her since her husband's death, but there was also something wistful on her face and bittersweet in her emotions as she watched the children around her. Her youngest son Kol was seated on the edge of the pool with his bare feet lowered into the water. He kicked his legs back and forth, slowly and steadily, watching ripples as they pulsed away. Nat was off to the side, seated on a short bench with Roan Fel. The two boys were playing some kind of game with black and white stones between them. The boys were distant cousins and, best Allana knew, hadn't seen in each other in years, but seemed content to be around each other. Perhaps, in a strange way, the three boys were taking consolation in their shared uncertainty.

Allana walked past Kol, Nat, and Roan to Jade. She crouched down on the rock beside her cousin and said, "You've almost got them all. Where's Vitor?"

"Taking a walk with his grandmother." Jade gestured to one of the pathways leading off into the leafy garden. "After what happened on Bastion they have a lot to talk about."

"I bet he's still missing Marin."

"That too."

"Do you know when they're set to arrive?"

"Soon," Jade said simply, and looked over at Nat and Roan playing their game. She didn't have to say that she was glad to have the Fel boys here to distract her sons from their grief. As Jodram had passed peacefully into the Force, his dying hadn't left the boys scarred and frightened as Jade had been after her mother's murder by Darth Xoran. Still, they were disconsolate. At just three years old, Kol could barely even grasp what death was. Nat, four years wiser and more mature, could still only grasp some of it. Neither of them knew the *how* of Jodram's death, or that their father's name was undeserving being used as a curse across a thousand worlds. One day they'd have to learn, and Allana could see the burden of that future revelation in Jade's eyes.

It seemed to Allana a sad fate that so many descendants of Anakin Skywalker grew up under the pain of loss. Luke had lost his mother and stepparents and learned too late the truth of his father. Ben had lost his mother, Jade hers, and now Kol and Nat would grow up in the shadow of their lost father. Allana, in turn, had lost her own father after seeing him transmuted into something awful, and had felt estranged from her mother for many years. Only Jaina and her descendants seemed blessed by an undivided family, but even that was coming to an end.

"When will the Grand Master be back?" Jade asked eventually.

"Anxious to have your ship?" Allana tried a smile.

Jade nodded. "We need him now."

"I know. He should be here within a day."

Jade nodded again and looked down at the shallow pool. Kol's still-steady kicks distorted their reflections in constant rhythm. Just watching the water, the ripples and changes, brought to mind what Allana had really come here to talk about. From the way she stared thoughtfully into the water, Jade might have been thinking about it too.

"When I talked to Lowbacca," she began, "He said that before he loaded everyone aboard *Jade Shadow* and started home, he went down into the tunnels beneath the ruins. He retraced his steps back to the pool you found."

"The Pool of Knowledge," whispered Jade. "Did he look into it?"

Allana nodded grimly. "Nothing had changed."

The younger woman stared hard at the water but her voice quavered. "You mean it was still... *him* on the throne?"

"That's right."

They both looked down, saying nothing, letting the possible implications wash over them. Allana had never been comfortable knowing about the vision Luke Skywalker, Jade, and her father had all seen of her on this Throne of Balance, and not just because of the horrors Jacen had produced to bring it about. The burden of destiny, that awful Skywalker load, had been weighing her since before she was born. On becoming Chief of State of the Alliance

she'd thought the prophecy fulfilled, but the future, as she'd been told, was always in motion.

In a whisper, so the children couldn't hear, Allana said, "What my father did to change his vision of the Dark Man released Abeloth. Do you think that, in killing her, *finally* killing her, we changed things back?"

Jade shook her head. "It didn't change when we killed Abeloth. It changed when she.... took Jodram. In that vision I saw he and I were *together*, protecting you."

If so it meant that, with Jodram gone, Allana was in more danger than ever. She was no stranger to that kind of risk; no Hapan princess could be. Still, it was another grim reminder of how uncertain the galaxy was becoming.

"There's another option," Allana whispered. "Maybe the vision changed because, when she took Jodram, Abeloth doomed herself. From that moment she was fated to die forever and *that* was why the vision changed."

Jade frowned. "I don't get what you mean."

"When she took Jodram's body she made conflict with you inevitable. Both of you." Allana reached out and squeezed Jade's arm. "She'd been alive for thousands of years. She was more powerful than any mortal Force-user could ever be. But you defeated her *together*."

"Jodram killed her," Jade swallowed.

"It was your raw power. His bravery. The love that bound you two together. Because of that Jodram did what no Sith or Jedi before him ever could or ever will again. The rest of the galaxy may never know what a hero he was but we do. Your sons have to know that too."

"They already do." For a moment Jade's face wavered with restrained tears; then she sucked them back, blinked them away, and added, "The lies they'll learn later. But they already know the truth."

Both women fell silent and watched the three boys. Kol withdrew his feet from the water and tried drying them with the sleeves of his tunic. Nat made a winning score of whatever game he

was playing a beamed proudly at Roan. There was no telling what was in store for these children as they'd grow to adulthood. Allana sadly doubted they'd grow up happy, with stable families untouched by tragedy; the descendants of Anakin Skywalker had never much luck on that score. But if they learned something through their pain and, by their sacrifices, left something greater for their own sons and daughters, it would be enough.

Roan suddenly perked his head up. Nat noticed his alarm and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," the other boy said. "It's my parents. They're here."

The Emperor's shuttle and Arlen's ship arrived together and set down in the Jedi Temple's hangar as one. The reunion on the flight deck gathered more people than Davek had expected. As he and Marasiah descended from their vessel their sons were waiting; so was Davek's mother. Arlen, his daughter, and Tamar Skirata descended from *Starlight Champion*. Also waiting for them were Allana Solo Djo, Jade Skywalker Tainer, and both her sons.

This gathering, as full of Skywalkers and Fels as anything Davek could remember, should have felt more joyous than it did. Its necessary brevity was just one pall hanging over things. So too were the absences of Jade's husband and Davek's father, so was the recent disaster on Coruscant and the war waiting to resume back in Imperial space.

For Davek, the biggest shadow over the meeting was his mother, and as soon as he could he drew her aside so they would walk through the Temple's corridors and say what needed to be said.

"I didn't want to do it," he told her. "I did what was necessary."

"Necessary for what?"

"To protect the Jedi. You and my sons. The Empire."

"Your father's legacy," Jaina said with a sigh.

"Yes. Exactly."

Jaina turned her brown eyes up at him. "Do you really believe *Jag* would have wanted this?"

"What other option was there? Veers had to be stopped. He would have destroyed the Empire and still failed to turn the clock back a hundred years."

"You didn't have to declare yourself *Emperor*, Davek. You should have called for free elections."

"I'm sorry, mother, but I did. Veers isn't the cause of all this, he's a symptom of a revolution father left half-finished. He thought he could reform the Empire from within, make it more free and equal and just, but do it by gradual democratic means. He meant the best but he was unrealistic. Democracy gives the people what they want but unless the people are, as a whole, willing to take massive risks then democracy is an inherently conservative and indecisive form of government. Democracy put moffs like Veers and Thane into power. It promoted weak leaders like Avaris who tried to placate all sides and accomplished nothing. If father's revolution is going to be finished, the Empire needs a strong leader who will force his values through, even on people who still yearn for Palpatine. We have to choose between democracy and justice. We can't have both."

"And do you think Jag would appreciate the posthumous honor of being the first Emperor Fel?"

There was bite in her tone. It hurt but Davek stood his ground. "Yes. He would see the necessity of what I've done and, in my place, he'd have done the same. He would have made that hard choice and defended justice over democracy."

She searched his eyes, like she wanted to make certain he believed that. When she saw that he did the sadness on her face only deepened. He pressed, "I never *wanted* this. I never wanted any of this. But someone had to take the burden. Someone had to be strong enough. I was the only one who could do it."

Jaina reached up. Her cold, thin fingers tickled his cheek. "Oh, Davek. You sound so much like... *him*."

"Who?"

She withdrew her hand. "My brother."

Davek shuddered. "I am *not* Jacen."

"His intentions were so *good*. But he tried to do everything himself and save everyone the burden. He became convinced that his way was the *only* way and everyone else became the enemy."

"I won't become a tyrant like him. I'll never be a Sith. I *can't*."

"I know." For the first time this conversation she sounded relieved.

"Mother, there's no Dark Side of the Force to seduce me. No Sith Lords trying to trap me. There's no Force at all. I'm not like you or Jacen. I'm like father. I'm just a man. I make my choices every step of the way."

"Power can corrupt anyone."

"I won't be corrupted."

Her eyes searched his. Whatever answer she found he couldn't tell; she just looked away. "What about the Jedi?"

"They'll be Imperial Knights now. Marasiah will lead them."

"As your Empress?"

"That's right. She'll be a strong leader, and a symbol."

"You'll be one together."

"That's right."

"And my grandsons?"

"They'll defend the Empire."

"Even if it means falling to the dark?"

He put a hand on her arm and squeezed. "No. I promise. Vitor and Roan will be *good* men. And good knights."

"And when you grow old, will Vitor succeed you? Will he be the *third* Fel Emperor?"

"Perhaps."

"That's an awful burden to place on someone so young."

"We all have burdens put on us by our bloodline. You and your brother did. So did Arlen and I. Vitor and Roan are the same."

"It was unfair to us all."

"I know, mother. But we do what we must."

Slowly, grimly, Jaina nodded. It wasn't approval. He hadn't been hoping to win that from her. But it was acceptance. It was enough. It would have to be.

When he found an opening Arlen slipped away from his daughter, pried Marasiah from her sons, and guided her to the edge of the hangar. Twilight had fallen over the Jedi Temple, turning the outside desert black.

"You have to watch out for him," Arlen said simply.

"I know," she said, looking out at the dark.

"And for your sons. And for *all* the Jedi on Bastion."

"Arlen, I *know*."

He watched her profile and tried to get a sense of her. Even when he'd trained her as a knight his sister-in-law had been hard to read. From childhood she'd imposed harsh discipline on herself as a way to bury self-doubt. Small wonder she'd found a match in Davek.

Trying a lighter tone he asked, "Are you *really* okay with what's happened?"

"Of course not," she said softly. "But Davek is right. It was the only thing we could do."

"Including severing ties with the Jedi Order?"

"They were always *Imperial* knights. Patriotism runs strong in most of them. You were always.... an outlier." She softened the words with a faint smile. "They'll miss your guidance. And I'll miss your help."

"Marasiah, even if you're not part of the Order you have to be a Jedi. You can't let you or any other knight be tempted by the Dark Side. No matter what happens, you *have* to keep your knights committed to the Light. And you have to keep Davek committed too."

"The Dark Side can never touch your brother."

"You know what I mean."

"Do you really think Davek is corruptible?"

"I think he'll have the power to do anything he *thinks* is right. Please, as a Jedi, make sure what he does *stays* right."

She turned from the night to look at him. "Arlen, do you think you have to *tell* me to protect Davek?"

"I just want to make sure you protect him from himself too."

She nodded curtly and looked back at the night. "Of course. That's what spouses are for."

An odd way of putting it, but it drew Arlen's attention back into the hangar. He looked over his shoulder and spotted Marin talking with Vitor; Roan, Kol, and Nat surrounded them, children looking up at the teenagers with mild awe. Tamar in *Champion's* shadow, apart from them, apart from everyone.

He heaved a very deep sigh, which caused Marasiah to turn and ask, "What?"

"Sorry," Arlen shook his head. "I've got too many goodbyes tonight."

Tamar and Arlen walked through the garden. One moon shone through the Cron Drift, illuminating its swirling gases and in turn casting a soft silver glow across the ferns and flowers, dirt paths and trickling streams. She almost felt at peace here.

"It will take time for her to get used to being here," Arlen said. "It's going to be very different from the Academy on Bastion."

"What about you?" Tamar glanced at him sidelong.

Arlen gave one of his loose, obfuscating shrugs. "I never totally fit in on Bastion. You know that."

She did. He had too much of his mother in him to be a good little Imperial. "I left my ship at Ravelin and need to pick it up. I'll be hitching a ride back with your brother if he'll let me."

"I think I can arrange it."

She wasn't looking forward to a flight back. She'd never gotten along well with Davek or his wife when she'd been, more or less, part of the family. She'd feel even less welcome among them now, but she needed to get back to Bastion.

"What happens when you get your ship?" asked Arlen. From his tone he knew the answer.

"With Auch's dead things are going to change. If I can be with my clan, I will."

"What's the latest from Mandalore?"

"Confusion. Nobody knows who's in charge or what's going on."

"Sounds like everywhere lately," he said without humor. "What happens if Auchs' family comes after yours?"

"*Ba'slan shev'la*. Strategic disappearance, we call it. Wouldn't be the first time we've pulled one. We scatter but keep in touch. Come back together when the *osik's* died down." He said nothing. She added, "I want to be with them, Arlen. I *have* to."

He didn't say anything, and in the low light she couldn't make out his face, but she got something from him in the Force; an entreaty she hadn't expected.

It tempted her. She was surprised by that. Despite it all she and Arlen still worked well as a team, and so much of her craved to be with their daughter, raising and guiding her like a proper mother-Jedi or Mando- should. But the possibility of that was gone now.

For so many years she'd made Gevern Auchs the locus of her pain. Sometimes she'd conjured up the memory of his bare face and focused on it, making it the embodiment of everything that had gone awry with her life. Her failure to become a Jedi, her failure to be a wife or mother, her failure to be a good Mandalorian like she'd always assumed she'd be; it had been so easy to blame Auchs for it all. Now he was gone. She'd gotten what she'd wanted and found herself more uncertain than ever. The face responsible for her *shabbed-up* life was the one she saw in mirrors.

Auchs' death had at least saved from all the lies she'd been telling herself. She could almost accept that, if not for the cost Marin would have to pay.

"It's better if I stay away," she said. "For her sake. Auchs' clan will never find out who killed him. I can protect Marin better if we're apart."

"Does she know that?"

"I'll tell her. I'm not abandoning her. I'm just laying low. For a while. And once things are settled down...."

"What?" He wasn't asking about her this time, or about them. Only Marin.

She didn't have an answer. She stopped on the path, facing him in the moonlit dark, and said, "Be careful with her. After what she's been through she's not going to be a cute little apprentice anymore."

"You think I don't know that?"

"She's going to have regret and anger and doubt all thrown into one nasty package now. Don't let that get the best of her. You don't want her to end up like her mother."

"Tamar," Arlen said, put both hands on her shoulders, and stopped. A patch of moonlight fell through the surrounding ferns and cast silver on his face, showing all the familiar details.

"Just be careful with her. If anyone can guide her through all that it's you."

He squeezed her shoulders and spoke his wordless offer. It was still tempting but too sweet to be believed. For one second, though, she let herself give in. She leaned in and kissed Arlen on the mouth, short and dry, then pulled back.

"Don't over-think that," she said.

He blinked. "I won't."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

With that she stepped around him and walked quickly away, retracing her course down the dark and winding path.

Jade had a lot of memories of Ossus. Almost all of them were colored by Jodram or her father. A few included the Chiss boy then called Ran'wharn'csapla. It seemed like only a handful had been made by her alone. She recalled one time, a few days or a week after her father's death, she'd stumbled out of her sleepless bed before dawn, walked up to the highest balcony on the Temple pyramid, and sat down to watch the sun rise. She remembered how it had chased away the night sky and colored gases of the Cron Drift and replaced them with cloudless blue, how it had warmed the dry wind and turned the desert from stark and sterile to something harsh but bright.

The morning after the Fel brothers arrived at Bastion, Jade went onto the same balcony and got the same sights. One thing about arid, rugged Ossus was that each day went pretty much the same. She remembered that had annoyed her growing up, when both Jodram and her father had been around, but this morning at least it felt like a balm.

Her aunt's arrival marked a change from last time around. Jaina opened the door of the balcony and soundlessly shuffled over to the ledge where Jade sat. Using the Force for a touch of strength, the old woman lifted her feet off the stone deck and placed herself next to the younger one.

"You're used to this, aren't you?" Jaina asked as she looked at the last shades of stars and stardust visible in the brightening sky.

"I was," Jade said. "But we spent so much time on Fengrine I thought... I thought that was home."

"You're not going back." Not even a question.

"We'll stay here on Ossus, I guess. With you and Allana. And Arlen and Marin."

"We'd all like that."

Jade found she didn't want to be here; it was too haunted with old memories of people who'd never come back. Fengrine was the same, but the memories were fresher. A part of her wanted to run off someplace new, someplace where no one ever called on a Skywalker to suffer loss for the galaxy's gain, but she couldn't. She had to raise her sons and raise them as Jedi, because even if they tried to hide their destiny would find them, as it had found her.

"It'll be so hard for them, growing up." Jade whispered, knowing Jaina would understand.

"Their father was a great Jedi. He did what no knight has ever done and saved us all."

"We know that. But to the rest of the galaxy they can't be Jodram Tainer's sons."

"They will be, in their hearts. And that's a good thing."

She wondered how Nat and Kol might handle that strange burden; whether they'd shoulder it together or whether they'd adapt to carry it in their own ways, ways that would drive them apart like Arlen and Davek.

She glanced at her aunt, saw the deep knowing in her eyes. She understood too much. For all their differences Jade and Jaina were at that moment the same: two women sharing the pain of a husband's loss and wondering if their sons would be forever divided by it.

"They'll be Jodram's sons, always," Jade whispered. "But to the rest of galaxy, they'll be Skywalkers."

She and Jaina both understood that in that name alone, destiny waited to be born.

The Imperial shuttle and *Starlight Champion* were such a contrast sitting side-by-side in the Jedi Temple's hangar bay. Davek's ovoid ship was smooth and gleaming, an imperious red; *Champion* was the same gray, angular, unusual ship Marin had known all her life.

It was a time for goodbyes. After staying the night on Ossus, her aunt and uncle were ready to leave. So, to, were Vitor and Roan. Her mother would be going with them as far as Bastion, then leaving to rejoin her clan.

Strangely, a part of Marin wished she were going with Tamar. The Skiratas had been different from everything she'd ever known. Everything with them was blunt, personal, often angry; the very opposite of what she'd been trained to be as a Jedi, but they weren't dark either. There was too much love between them. Alien as Ninet, Dorn, and the rest had seemed she missed them. The Jedi Temple on Ossus was similar to the academy on Bastion but after just one night she could tell it was different in a thousand subtle ways that added together to alienate. Unlike her short mission with the Skiratas, she would stay on Ossus, with these Jedi strangers, for a long time.

She could have accepted that if not for losing Vitor. They'd stayed up late last night, talking in private, telling everything of what had passed between them like they'd shared everything before. It had been harder this time for them both. Vitor had no name for the emotion he felt looking into the face of the young Sith woman he'd killed. When Marin thought of Govern Auch's decapitated helmet rolling across the deck of his ship she felt cold and empty inside.

They might have worked through that confusion together, but they'd never get the chance.

When everyone started to say goodbyes Marin stood back. Jaina embraced her younger son tight; then Vitor and then Roan.

Arlen pulled Marasiah into a hug and slapped her back. He and Tamar kept their distance; no hugs, no handshakes, but a pair of shared nods and something in the Force Marin couldn't read. She'd already said goodbye to her mother in private, but Tamar stepped forward for one more embrace.

When it came time for Davek and Arlen to part, they hesitated, stuck two meters apart. A Force-push from their mother sent them both stumbling forward, but the coy shove brought no chagrin or release. Davek extended a hand. Arlen shook it firmly, then let go. The brothers stepped away without sharing a word.

Marasiah took Roan by the hand and guided him up the ramp and into their royal red ship. Once they'd disappeared inside its hold Tamar went up alone. Davek got halfway up before he stopped, turned, and saw his son still at the base, looking across the short distance at Marin.

She crossed to him. They stood close enough to touch but stared at each other's boots, uncertain what to say.

"We'll see each other again," Vitor offered finally.

Marin wasn't sure how, since her father had been effectively banished from Imperial space. Been banished or banished himself, she wasn't sure. Nothing made sense anymore.

But she forced a smile and said, "Yeah. I'm sure we will."

Vitor held his arms up and to the sides, inviting a hug. Marin stepped up, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and squeezed them tight.

"You're going to be a great Jedi," Vitor said as he squeezed her back. "I know it."

Marin wished she could believe him. She'd taken it on faith that she'd become that, someday, just as she'd assumed Vitor would be there with her. Now that finality seemed distant and uncertain; it didn't even feel as desirable as it had, though she had no idea what else she could ever be.

As she released him she said, "Stay safe, Vitor."

"You too." He gave her arm one last squeeze and released. Their eye held; then he turned and walked up the ramp. Marin waited

until he joined his father and both marched out of sight to step away from the shuttle.

She joined her father and grandmother and stood beside them to watch the shuttle retract its ramp, fire its repulsors, and rise into the air. Marin watched it pivot and turn and leap out of the hangar, into the morning, where its two thrust-trails streaked white across sheer blue until the white dwindled and dissolved into sky.

Once it was gone the hangar went quiet. Jaina left first without a word. Arlen, deep in his own thoughts, did the same. Marin lingered longest on the flight deck, watching the empty space where her family had been. Eventually she turned and went join what was left of it.

About the Author

Gregory O. Scott is a pen name for fan fiction writer HandofThrawn45. When Disney rebooted the Expanded Universe in 2014, it brought about the official end of the Star Wars Legends continuity. Yet while no official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.

About the Type

This book was set in Minion, a 1990 Adobe Originals typeface by Robert Slimbach (b. 1956). Minion is inspired by classical, old-style typefaces of the late Renaissance, a period of elegant, beautiful, and highly readable type designs. Created primarily for text setting, Minion combines the aesthetic and functional qualities that make text type highly readable with the versatility of digital technology.